

Through Thick & Thin by gbrie

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Summary: It's Christmas 1991. El and Mike are 20, and back home in Hawkins for the Holidays after another semester away at college in California. Mileven proposal, and so much else... guys, so much happens, I don't even know how to write this summary without spoiling anything. Sequel(ish) to Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust.

1. Chapter 1

Guys I'm baack! Welcome to my second story!

1) As mentioned in the description, this is a sequel to my first story, Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust. I suggest you read that one first, but you don't have to. There aren't that many references between the two. Here's the link if you're interested : [s/13040143/1/Ashes-To-Ashes-Dust-To-Dust](https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13040143/1/Ashes-To-Ashes-Dust-To-Dust)

2) I do not own Stranger Things, nor am I affiliated with it in any way. I'm just a girl who misses Stranger Things and Mileven wayyy too much.

3) I don't always respond to individual reviews, but I promise you I read every single one of them, and it makes my heart so happy when you guys take the time to add my story to your favourites, review a chapter, or follow me! The positive feedback I got from my first story motivated me to write this one, so don't be shy!

That's it guys! I hope you all enjoy! Love you all and thank you for reading!

Gabby xxx

CHAPTER 1

"Come on, El," muttered Mike behind the wheel of his 1969 Mustang. It was December 21st 1991, and the sun shone fiercely upon the city of Berkeley, California, despite the fact that today was the first official day of winter. The entire month of December had been unusually hot and sunny - even by California standards - and although he and Eleven had been away from Hawkins and living in the golden state for two years now, it still felt strange to Mike to be so close to Christmas and living amongst palm trees, breathing in the salty sea air, as opposed to the dreary, dull scenery that offered his home state of Indiana at this time of year.

"Michael," a female voice jolted him out of his thoughts. He turned to

see Jaclyn, one of El's nursing classmates, her freckled face semi poking inside the driver seat window.

"Jaclyn, hey."

"Jane should be out any minute now. She was talking to our psych teacher as I walked out," offered Jaclyn, glancing in the general direction of the Quest Nursing Education Center before fixing her gaze back on Mike. "You guys heading home?"

Mike nodded and patted the side of his mustang affectionately. "Yep, all packed up and ready to go. Our flight is in four hours. What about you? You got any family out here?"

Jaclyn nodded. "San Francisco, born and bred. My folks and brother and sister all live there. My cousin has a place here, and she had an extra room for me, so I figured, why not. Skip the traffic every morning and night. I go back home on weekends."

"That's cool. I mean, it's great that you get to do that," said Mike. "Hawkins is a 34 hour drive from here. It's not exactly next door."

Jaclyn laughed breezily. "No, I guess not," she replied, flashing Mike her set of perfect, white teeth and tucked a strand of stray hair behind her ear. Her eyes lingered on Mike, and he did his best to avoid making eye contact. Even he, who was usually totally oblivious to flirting and/or any type of suggestive body language, suspected that Jaclyn had a tiny bit of a crush on him. She had this habit of hanging around a little too long whenever he was around, smiling just a little too brightly, and laughing at his jokes a little too loudly. Mike often had to coax the conversation out of her - if not, she'd just stay there, not really saying anything, all the while staring at him with all the subtlety of a twelve year old girl schoolgirl interacting with her first crush.

Suddenly, the passenger car opened with a creek, and El slid her way into the seat.

"Hey," she said, smiling at Mike. She glanced up at Jaclyn. "Hi, Jackie."

"Hey, Jane. Happy holidays, you two," replied Jaclyn. "Hey, Jane - do you maybe want to get together after you get back from Indiana to work on the psych project? Go to the library and do some research. It's always more fun when you have a partner. I hate going to the library alone. The silence disturbs me."

El laughed. "Sure. Okay. I'll call you."

"Okay." She turned to leave. "See you around," she said, her eyes falling on Mike as she said it. Then she walked away.

El kissed his cheek. "So, how did your final exam go?"

"Do you think Jaclyn has a crush on me?" asked Mike suddenly, turning towards El.

El was baffled by his question. "Where did that come from?"

"No, I'm serious. Why does she always come talk to me? Every time she sees me, it's like she *has* to come over," continued Mike.

"Because she's my friend, and she's just being friendly?" retorted El. "She knows how much I love you. How special our relationship is. Trust me, she would never."

"El - I'm telling you, it's more than that. She's always touching her hair, or smiling. The other day, she touched my bicep. Out of nowhere! It was totally uncalled for!"

El rolled her eyes. "So what! She's always hugging me at school and touching me. She's just a touchy person."

Mike sighed, but decided to drop it. What good could come out of this conversation? He turned the key in the engine, and the mustang roared to life.

"Someone touched Mike's bicep! The mighty Michael Wheeler! The envy of every man and woman in the whole state of California!"

Mike grinned, facing forward as he navigated his way out of the school parking lot. He pressed his free hand against the side of El's face. She giggled.

"Now you're just mocking me."

"I'm not! I love your skinny biceps," said El, laughing. She grabbed his hand, and brought it to her lips to give it a sweet kiss. Mike turned his face to smile at her.

"I can't wait to be home. But we can't stay too long, Mike - I've got a ton of schoolwork to do over Christmas vacation."

"Same," replied Mike, bummed to even be thinking about it. "I start school again on the 12th, what about you?"

"10th. I got my psych paper due on the 11th, so we have to come back at least three days before so I can work on it with Jackie. Your new girlfriend," teased El, barely containing her laughter.

Mike tickled her ribs as he kept his eyes on the road. El burst into a fit of giggles as she twisted and turned in her seat.

"Shut. Up," he muttered as he continued to tickle her mercilessly.

"Mike, stop, I can't breathe," she pleaded, breathless.

"That's what you get," he replied, smiling triumphantly as he steered towards the exit that would lead them to Oakland International Airport.

Hopper and Joyce were waiting for them at the arrivals section of Indianapolis International Airport. Joyce was waving like crazy and jumping up and down, whereas Hopper stood beside her, calm and collected as usual.

"Hi! Oh, hi baby, I've missed you so much," cried Joyce, embracing El into a tight hug.

"Mom, I can't breathe."

"Just let me hold you for a little while longer, sweetie," replied Joyce, not loosening her grip.

Hopper stuck his hand out towards Mike. Mike grabbed it and shook

it as firmly as he could.

"Good to see you, Jim."

"How was your flight?" asked Hopper.

"It was great, actually. You get so much more leg space when you fly first class," said El, finally free from Joyce's grasp. "Mike slept the whole time," she added, poking him in the ribs.

"And God knows you need that leg space, don't you sweetie," said Joyce as she pulled Mike into another one of her might bear hugs. "Seems like you grew some more since this summer, Mike."

"I just hit 6'1," replied Mike. "Doc says guys stop growing around twenty-one. I'm guessing this is it for me."

"Well, you may still have another year to go," said Hopper. "But you'll never make it to 6'3. I'll always look down at ya, kid."

"Jim," said Joyce, rolling her eyes. She wrapped her arm around El's shoulder and began leading her towards the exit.

"Joyce, it's just friendly competition with my son-in-law. Nothing wrong with that," defended Hopper as he grabbed El's luggage. Mike shook his head, grinning, and followed after them.

2. Chapter 2

"Welcome, welcome!" greeted Will as he swung the entrance door to the Hopper-Buyer's residence wide open.

"Will!" exclaimed El, throwing her arms around him. "I missed you!"

"Missed you more," responded Will as he wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her back affectionately. Then he released his hold on El and turned to face Mike.

"Whaddup, Mike!" he cried excitedly, pulling him into a hug.

"Hey, buddy. So good to see you, man," replied Mike, patting him on the back.

Will released himself from Mike's grasp and held him at arm's length to study him. "Am I getting shorter or are you getting taller still?"

Mike laughed. "My money's on you getting shorter." Will punched him on the chest playfully.

It was time for another round of greetings when Jonathan appeared from the kitchen, with Nancy by his side. The two had reconciled last summer, when Nancy had moved back home from New York after completing her law degree. She had moved back home with Karen and Ted while she studied for her Bar exam, which was coming up in a few weeks. Jonathan, on the other hand, had never left Hawkins, and worked full time (and more) at the one of the local auto shops. They were going to move in together once Nancy became a full-on lawyer. Her plan was to start her own private practice here in Hawkins.

"I've missed you, little brother," said Nancy as she embraced Mike.

"Yeah, me too sis. Although it pains me deeply to admit it."

Nancy reached up to give him a light smack behind the head. "You're such a dick." Mike laughed. Nothing like good old sibling rivalry.

"Everyone, go to the living room, I laid out some food!" called Joyce

from the kitchen.

"Mom's coming over with Holly," said Nancy. "Joyce invited them."

"What about dad?" asked Mike.

Nancy glanced at Jonathan. Jonathan just looked back at her, uneasy.

"Um... Dad moved out, Mike. They're getting a divorce."

Mike was surprised to feel his heart sink. He blinked. "Seriously?"

Nancy nodded gravely. "Yeah. It happened last month. Mom didn't want to tell you right away so your grades wouldn't suffer. You know, with your finals and all. It just didn't feel like the right time."

El was shocked, too, although Karen and Ted separating had been a long time coming. They had to expect this would happen eventually. She placed her hand on Mike's shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry," she whispered, leaning into him.

Mike was still too baffled to say anything. His mind was processing what this would mean for their family, especially during the holidays. Where was his dad staying? Had his mom kicked him out? What had happened, exactly?

"It's okay, El," replied Nancy. "They hadn't had a relationship for years. It was just a matter of time."

El nodded. She knew this, of course. Everyone did.

"Are you okay?" asked Nancy, touching her brother's arm.

"Yeah! Yeah. No, I'm fine," said Mike, shaking himself out of his daze. "It's just... a shock, you know."

"Of course," said Nancy quietly.

"How's Holly taking it?" asked Mike, suddenly overcome with concern for his twelve year old sister.

Nancy shrugged. "She's okay. It's harder to understand the dynamics

of a dysfunctional marriage at that age. But she'll be alright. She knew they didn't love each other anymore, so there's that, at least." She paused. "Do you think... maybe you can pretend that you don't know when Mom tells you?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah. Sure."

El snaked her arms around his waist and squeezed him hard. "Come on, let's go have some good old holiday comfort food. I'm starving."

"Okay," said Mike, following her into the living room in a zombie-like state, consumed by thoughts of his parents' unhappy marriage.

As he entered the living room, he immediately spotted a short, blond boy sitting on the couch next to Will. Will had his hand on the boy's leg, and both of them were laughing uncontrollably. Will had smudged what appeared to be cream cheese on his nose, presumably from the smoked salmon topped with cream cheese cracker he was holding in his left hand. The unknown boy reached over and wiped the cream cheese from Will's nose with his thumb, then casually sucked it clean. Mike watched as the scene unravelled before him.

When Will spotted Mike, he immediately stopped laughing and whispered something into the boy's ear. The boy looked up, his eyes locking with Mike's. Mike could only stare back, confused. *What was happening?*

Will and the blond boy slowly made their way across the living room over to where Mike and Eleven were standing. Will cleared his throat as he laced his arm around the boy's shoulder.

"Mike, Eleven, this is uh... this is my boyfriend, James."

Mike clutched El's waist, fearing for a brief moment that he might literally fall over in shock. The words hit him like a tidal wave.

El, however, moved forward and embraced James almost immediately, giving him a peck on each kiss. "James, it is so nice to finally meet you. I'm Eleven. Or Jane. Whichever you're more comfortable with."

James beamed at her. "Of course. The million dollar woman," he said,

referring to her lawsuit against Hawkins Lab. El laughed, blushing. "I love Eleven. It's so much more unique. Whereas Jane is a little more... well..."

"Plain?" offered El. She and James both erupted into laughter. Mike didn't get the joke. *So nice to finally meet you*, El had said. So she had known about this, and not told him?

"Exactly. Plain Jane. And honey, you are anything but."

James reluctantly shifted his gaze to Mike. Mike was staring at him, but from where the rest of them were standing, appeared to be looking right through him. He just stood there, unblinking.

"Mike," whispered El. He barely heard her.

"Hey, Mike," offered James shyly as he held his hand out to him. "Will told me all about you, too. Said you've been best friends since you were kids."

This seemed to snap Mike out of his daze. "Yeah, sure have," he replied, glancing at Will. An unsettling, awkward silence filled the air.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," muttered Mike as he walked away. Eleven and Will exchanged glances.

"You haven't told him?" hissed Will.

"I haven't told him? I thought *you* were going to tell him," she hissed back.

"I was going to! I was! But then... I don't know. I wasn't sure *how* to tell him. It's not the sort of thing you tell someone over the phone. Especially not your best friend."

James looked at El, then at Will, then back at El, mildly amused. Will turned to face him and sighed.

"Well, that didn't go as well as I thought it would."

Joyce clinked her spoon against her glass of wine as she rose from her seat around the kitchen table. "I'd like to say a little something before we start dinner." The conversations came to a halt as everyone quieted down.

Joyce cleared her throat. "I just want to say thank you for being here. Nancy, Karen, Holly, James. Mike, you too, of course, dear, but you've been a part of our household so many years, now. You're almost like my own son. Except erm, maybe not, because that would be weird." She laughed nervously at her own bad choice of words. Everyone chuckled.

Everyone except Mike.

Joyce brushed off Mike's unresponsiveness. "Thank you for being here tonight, everyone. Our Christmases used to be much different, many years ago, back when it was just me, Will, and Jonathan. Then you all came along, and I couldn't feel more blessed. My heart swells to see what wonderful young adults you've all become." Her voice cracked at the last sentence. Hopper placed his hand on her back.

She cleared her throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get emotional. It... just seems like yesterday that you were all still children. Time sure does fly. We've all been through so much together. Yet here we are, united. Because that's what family does." She raised her glass, as did everyone else. Even Mike, although it seemed like it was the last thing on Earth he wanted to do.

"To our children's safe return. We are so glad to have you home. And a very special thanks to my amazing husband for helping me set up dinner," Joyce finished her toast by clinking her glass against Hopper's. Everyone followed suit, clinking their glasses against each other's.

Joyce clapped her hands together. "Okay, let's eat everyone! I hope you all enjoy."

Everyone gave their thanks to Joyce, and began to chow down on the plates set before them. Karen handed Nancy the macaroni salad from across the table, whereas Jonathan reached over to give the bread

basket to Holly. The hum of mixed conversations grew louder as everyone ate and chatted.

Will, who was sitting directly across from Mike, was desperate to make eye contact with him, but Mike avoided him at all costs. In fact, Mike had barely looked up from his plate at all, and continued to stare blankly at it as he picked his food apart.

Eleven sipped her wine and ate her food, watching both of them in silence, concerned. She hadn't seen Mike upset like this in a long, long time, if ever. James, who was sitting beside Will, looked concerned, too, but Holly kept trying to make conversation with him, totally oblivious to the whole situation. James tried as best he could to appear enthusiastic and happy, but kept stealing sideways glances at Will.

"Mike," croaked Will.

"Not now, Will," responded Mike flatly, not looking up from his plate.

"I know it's not the right time. But I really have to talk to you," pressed Will. El and James exchanged nervous glances, both taking huge sips of their wine.

"Will, you could have talked to me yesterday. You could have talked to me last week. Picked up the phone and called me last month. But you didn't okay? And here we are," said Mike, raising his voice. Will looked down at his plate, defeated. He stabbed a piece of turkey with his fork.

"Mike," murmured El.

"El, stay out of it," snapped Mike. El recoiled, taken aback by his harsh tone. Everyone stopped their conversation and turned to look at Mike, equally shocked. He never snapped at Eleven like this.

"You want to talk about it? Okay. Let's talk about it. Who here knew that Will Buyers was gay?" asked Mike, almost shouting as he glanced at everyone around the table. Joyce and Jim exchanged glances, as did Nancy and Jonathan. Holly guilty looked down at her plate.

"Seriously. Everyone must have known, right? Since you're all acting

like James here has been a part of this family for years. Joyce, you knew him, right? Jonathan, Nancy? El?" He looked them in the eye as he called their names, and they all averted his gaze. Mike scoffed, his eyes darting from one family member to the next, further guiltting them into silence.

He turned to face Will again. "How long have you guys been together?" he asked, the anger in his voice cutting through the heavy air like a hot knife in butter.

Will cleared his throat, and finally glanced up to hold Mike's gaze. "Six months," he replied.

Mike nodded. "Six months. Wow. Well congratulations, you two. Really."

"Mike," said El. "Calm down."

But Mike was far from finished. "You told El, Will, and you didn't tell me? What, I'm not family enough for you?! I thought we were best friends. I thought that meant something."

"We are!" cried Will. "We are, Mike! It does mean something!"

"How long have you been keeping this secret from me?"

"Mike..."

"How long?!" shouted Mike.

"Michael!" said Karen, raising her voice. "Enough!"

Mike turned on Karen. "And you! Don't even get me started. You get a divorce, and I don't get so much as a phone call?"

Whatever Karen had been expecting, she hadn't expected that. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. She shot an accusing glance at Nancy, who looked guiltily down at her plate.

Mike's eyes darted across the table again. "Seriously! Is there a Don't-Tell-Mike code you guys have between yourselves, or are you all just traitors by nature?"

Everyone just sat in silence. Tears spilled down Will's cheeks. James placed an arm over his shoulder.

Mike rose from his seat, and downed his glass of wine before slamming it down on the table.

"To fucking family," he said, before disappearing from the kitchen.

"Mike!"

But it was too late. They all jumped when the front door slammed shut.

3. Chapter 3

Mike's original plan was walk around town for a little while to try to calm himself, then go back and apologize to Joyce for ruining her dinner. As mad as he was at his entire family right now - including El - he still felt terrible for storming out and ruining all hard work she'd put into her welcome-home party.

But after twenty minutes, he still wasn't ready to face everyone yet. Truth was, he needed to talk about it. About Will, about his parents divorce, about how mad he was at everyone for leaving him in the dark for such important matters.

He stopped at a payphone on Cherry Tree Drive.

"Hello?" an older woman's voice demanded.

"Mrs. Henderson, it's Mike Wheeler. How are you?"

"Michael! Oh my goodness! I haven't seen you in ages! How *are* ya, darlin'? How's your mother?"

"I'm good. She's good. We're good," Mike lied. "I was calling to ask if Dustin was home. I'd like to come over and see him"

"DUSTIN!" Mrs. Henderson screamed into the phone. Mike winced, distancing the phone away from his ear. "DUSTIN, IT'S MICHAEL ON THE PHONE FOR YOU!"

Silence as Mrs. Henderson put down the phone. Mike put the phone back to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"Hey man. It's Mike. Listen, can I come over?"

"Yeah, of course dude. Lucas is here, too. We're downstairs playing A Link to the Past."

Mike smiled into the phone. Perfect.

"Alright, I'll be there in 5."

"And then I left," finished Mike. He sighed, frustrated with himself. The whole thing seemed really childish when he told the story out loud.

Dustin shook his head, not peeling his eyes away from the TV. "Wow. You didn't hold back. I can't believe you ruined Joyce's dinner."

"Yeah man," agreed Lucas. "Joyce is like, the sweetest human being on Earth. The worst part is she's probably over there feeling like shit, thinking it's her fault in some twisted way."

Mike rubbed his face in his hands. "I know. I feel terrible about it. And I'll apologize to her as soon as I get home. But this isn't about Joyce. This is about Will not telling me he was gay."

"Dude, he didn't *tell* us either," said Lucas. "It's not like there was some big coming out. I kind of already knew. Then James came along and it was like, *Oh, alright. Makes sense*, you know? Can't say I was surprised."

"Yeah, me neither," said Dustin, punching away at the buttons on his *Super Nintendo* controller. "It wasn't a big deal."

Mike just looked at them, shocked. "*Not a big deal*? Will's been carrying this secret for years, and he's never told us! Kept it hidden this whole time! Don't you guys feel at least a little bit betrayed?"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Mike, you're acting like such a girl right now. He probably never told us because he wasn't ready. And when he finally *was* ready, he brought James. And now everyone knows. And we all like him just the same."

"Lucas is right, man," agreed Dustin. "Nothing's changed."

Mike considered this as he watched the game in silence.

Dustin spoke up again. "But, you know, maybe Will wasn't all that comfortable telling you, either. When he started seeing James, he practically begged us not to tell you. Said he wanted to tell you

himself. I guess he just never had the guts to go through with it."

Mike straightened himself up on the couch and angled his body towards Dustin. "See, that's exactly what I mean. Why the fuck did he feel like he couldn't tell me? *That's* what bothers me. We've always been so open and honest with each other," he explained. "I don't get it. I just don't."

"Dude, you used to try to set him up with girls in high school. And you were way pushy about it, too," said Lucas. "Maybe he just thought you wouldn't be that open."

Mike laughed. "What? I wasn't pushy about it."

"Yeah, you kinda were," said Dustin.

Mike scoffed in disbelief, folding his arms across his chest defensively. "Okay, it happened like, three times! And did it ever occur to you that I just wanted him to find someone that would make him happy? Will's a great guy. And he's been through so much. I just wanted to help."

"Well, he's happy now," said Lucas. "And you kinda ruined it for him."

Mike let the wave of guilt wash over him. He knew he deserved it.

"Plus, for a time you used to say 'that's gay' a lot," continued Lucas. "That was gay, this was gay. It was kind of your favourite adjective for a while."

Mike thought back to eighth grade and those awkward, obnoxious, attention-seeking puberty years. Lucas was right. He did used to throw that word around a lot.

"You're right," he admitted shamefully. "But I never meant it like that...I never meant to hurt his feelings... God, how was I such an idiot back then?"

"Not an idiot, just immature. As all eighth graders are," said Dustin, his first encouraging words of the night.

Mike rose to his feet. His business was done here. He knew he had to

go home and start apologizing. "Okay. I have to go. Thank for not letting me come here to wallow in self-pity."

"That's not what you came here for, Mike. You came here so we could tell you you were an asshole," said Dustin.

"So you could face it, accept it, and go make up for it," finished Lucas. They both looked up from the game and smiled at him triumphantly.

Mike shook his head, grinning. "You guys know me too well."

When he got home to the Buyers house, the lights were out in the kitchen and living room. It was 10:30. Mike had stayed at Dustin's longer than he'd thought. He had no choice but to wait to apologize to Joyce in the morning.

As he passed by Will's window while making his way to El's, he noticed the lights were out and his room was vacant. He'd successfully driven Will out of the comfort of his own home.

When he slid El's window open, she was reading on her bed in one of his t-shirts. She put her book down when she saw Mike come in.

"I'm sorry," he declared almost immediately. "I really am."

El offered him an encouraging smile and patted the bed, motioning for him to come over. Mike kicked off his shoes, shut the window, and went to sit down next to her. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he leaned his head on top of hers.

"I feel terrible about your mom. And Will. And you," he said, lacing his fingers through hers. "I should have never snapped at you like that. I'm so sorry, El."

She squeezed his hand. "I feel terrible too. I hated having to keep a secret from you. But Will begged me not to tell you anything until he did. I was so torn about it, Mike."

Mike turned his head to look at her face. "I understand. I do. Please don't be sorry, El. I'm the one who acted like a jerk. I don't know why

I made such a big deal about it."

El propped her chin on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Because you felt betrayed. By Will, me, and your mom for not telling you about her divorce. Everything blew up in your face at the same time. You're not perfect, Mike. It's okay to not be okay sometimes."

Mike closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. God, he loved her.

"And don't worry about my mom," continued El in a soft voice. "She understands. She's not mad at you. She's just concerned."

This made him feel even worse. "I'll apologize first thing to her in the morning. Then I'll go talk to Will and James." He paused. "What... happened after I left?"

El sighed, and propped herself up against the wall. "Well, Will was pretty upset. He and James left almost immediately after you. The rest of us finished dinner, then your mom and Holly left, and the rest of us played cards and had some tea."

Mike swallowed hard. He had to think of a way to make it up to them.

El placed two fingers under his chin, gently lifting it so he would look into her eyes. "Mike, don't worry about it. It's going to be okay. Just make sure Will understands that you love him, no matter what his sexual preference is. So what if he's gay? It's not going to change anything in your friendship. As long as he's happy and healthy. It's all that matters."

Mike sighed. El was right, of course, as she often was. "You're right," he admitted out loud, drawing shapes with his finger on El's thigh.

El leaned in to kiss him. "Come to bed," she yawned, placing her book on her nightstand. "Tomorrow's another day, okay?"

"I'll go brush my teeth, I'll be right back," he said. As he made his way to the bathroom, he passed a framed picture of him and Will when they were kids, all dressed up for one of their first D&D evenings. He brushed his fingers across the photograph, reminiscing about simpler

times, and longed for morning to come so he could make things right with him.

When he got back to the room, El was fast asleep with the night lamp on. He smiled as he went to turn it off, then stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed with her. He wrapped his arm around her, spooning her as he gently pulled her body closer to him, and kissed her neck, feeling luckier than ever to be in love with his best friend.

4. Chapter 4

The following morning, Mike woke up to an empty bed. He reached for the note on the nightstand:

Gone Christmas shopping with Max. Be home later.

Take a deep breath. Remember, you got this.

I love you,

El

He glanced at the alarm clock. It was 10:00 - he'd slept like a rock. He grabbed some fresh clothes from his nearby suitcase, and headed out to the kitchen. Joyce and Hopper were sitting at the kitchen table having their breakfast, and both stopped what they were doing when they saw Mike.

"Good morning, sweetie," said Joyce. Mike winced, feeling the sting of guilt all over again. He'd treated her terribly last night - he'd ruined her dinner and stormed off, yet she still had the kindness to call him *sweetie*. Typical Joyce.

"Joyce, I feel terrible," he said, sliding into a chair across from her and Hopper. "I'm so sorry about what happened last night. I didn't mean to disrespect you. I just.. I blew up. In front of everyone, and I feel horrible about it."

Joyce offered him a warm smile and reached across the table to place her hand on top of his. "Sweetheart, it's okay."

Mike shook his head. "No, it's not. I snapped at El. I yelled at Will. I ruined your dinner. And I was mean to my mom, too. I don't know what came over me."

Hopper crossed his arms across his chest. "Kid, a divorce is never an easy thing to accept, no matter how unhappy your parents were. It's a tough thing for any child to go through - even if you're not a child anymore. It's still disheartening. You're probably going through all kinds of confusing emotions right now, and it's completely normal."

Mike glanced at Hopper. With time, he'd become a lot more communicative and open to these kinds of heartfelt discussions. Mike figured it was Joyce and El that had slowly but surely chipped away at the stone walls he had built for himself after the loss of his daughter, and his past struggle with alcoholism and depression. On the inside, Hopper was a softie - Mike had known it all along.

Joyce continued. "Your mother wasn't purposefully trying to keep it a secret from you, sweetie. She was just waiting for you to come home so you guys could talk about it face-to-face."

Mike nodded. "I know. And as for Will, I just want to be clear - my problem isn't with him being gay. I have nothing against it," Mike explained defensively. After last night's talk with Lucas and Dustin, he wanted to make sure it was out in the open that he wasn't homophobic. "I'm just hurt that he felt like he couldn't tell me."

"We know sweetheart. And to be honest, I'm not sure why he didn't tell you sooner, either.." She took a sip of her coffee and leaned back in her chair, pondering on Mike's words. "I'm guessing it's a very hard thing to do. He probably just didn't want to lose you. He didn't want you to think less of him for it."

"That's crazy," Mike blurted out. "I would never. It doesn't change anything for me. It doesn't change our friendship."

"I know that, sweetheart. I guess you'll just have to talk it out with him."

"I was going to do that first thing. But first I wanted to apologize to the both of you." He offered them a sheepish smile. "So... you don't hate me?" He felt like a 10 year-old again, begging the grown-ups for forgiveness.

Joyce laughed. "Of course not, sweetie. We could never hate you." She placed a hand on top of his again. "You're family, Mike." Mike offered her a warm smile in return. Joyce was the best.

Hopper chimed in. "No offense taken, kid. Just take it easy on Will. And your mom - she's going through a lot."

He's right, Mike thought. He'd been so busy thinking about how the divorce would affect him, Nancy, and Holly, that he hadn't even taken a minute to put himself in his mother's position. Becoming single again, after twenty-six years of marriage. How lonely she must feel. His heart ached for her.

"You're right, Jim." He rose from his seat, but realized he was forgetting something. "Um... could you give me James' address? I'll head over there right after I shower."

Joyce rose from her seat and walked over to the fridge, grabbed a pen and notepad, and started scribbling James' address down. She ripped off the page and handed it to Mike.

"One more thing," she said, holding a finger up as she walked over to her coat and produced car keys from her pocket. "Take my car. I don't need it."

Mike beamed at Joyce, and leaned down to give her a hug. "Thank you, Joyce."

Mike was sweating bullets by the time he pulled up in front of James' lawn. Although he'd put a lot of thought into his apology since last night, he still wasn't sure how he was going to start off the conversation. Were they going to greet him with hostility, turn him away at the door? Spit in his face? Okay, maybe not spit in his face. Well, probably not.

Mike studied James' house as he made his way to the front door. He had to be living with his parents. No 20 year-old could afford a place like this, even in Hawkins. The house was huge - three stories, probably - with a built in double-door garage. Mike wondered what his parents did for a living to afford a house like this. *You'd know if you'd have taken the time to talk to him yesterday*, the small voice inside his head scolded him.

Mike took a deep breath, and tried to clear his mind as he knocked on the door. El's words popped into his head. *You got this*. James answered seconds later, dressed in plaid pyjama pants and a plain, blue t-shirt, mug of coffee in hand.

"Michael," said James, raising his eyebrows. "What a surprise." He leaned casually against the doorframe, taking a sip of his coffee.

Mike wasn't sure if the remark was meant as a small jab. He brushed it off.

"James, I came over here to apologize. I feel truly, truly terrible about how I treated Will - and you - last night. Do you... do you think I could talk to the both of you privately for a minute?" offered Mike, trying to keep his voice steady.

James just stood leaning against the doorframe, silent as he studied him for a moment. He took another sip of his coffee.

"Sure," he finally said. "Come on in. My parents are out."

Mike walked in and removed his shoes. He gasped as he took in his surroundings. The entire house had to be about thirty feet high, with wide, open spaces, and a cathedral roof made entirely of glass. The walls were made of wood and brick. To his right, the spacey living room was adorned with three massive black leather couches, very expensive looking carpets, and a huge fireplace.

"Wow," breathed Mike. "Your house is amazing."

"Thanks," replied James. He pointed to one of the couches. "You can sit. I'll get Will." Was James giving him a look, or was Mike imagining it? He didn't have much time to think about it before Will descended from the spiral staircase.

"Hey," he said shyly.

Mike shot up from his seat immediately. "Will."

Will cleared his throat, averting Mike's gaze. He motioned for him to sit back down. James showed up from the kitchen, with two extra coffees and a tray containing milk, cream, and sugar. He handed one of the coffees to Mike.

"Serve yourself," he said curtly, motioning to the cream and sugar, and sat down beside Will, handing him the other mug.

Mike glanced down at his trembling hands, feeling his pounding heart beating rapidly inside his chest and figured caffeine probably wouldn't help to calm his nerves. But he didn't want to be rude, so he fixed himself cup with cream and sugar, and took a very tiny sip.

"Will, I feel terrible about last night. I'm so sorry I reacted that way," he began. "I don't know what came over me. I need you to know that I'm not against... the fact that you're gay. It doesn't change the way I feel about you, and it doesn't change our friendship. Not one bit."

The corners of Will's lips twisted upwards into a smile. It gave Mike the courage to continue.

"It doesn't, okay? I'll love you, always. No matter what. You're my best buddy. I was just... really hurt that you felt like you couldn't tell me, when everyone else already knew."

"I know. I should have told you, Mike," he said. "I don't know why I didn't."

"I do," replied Mike. "I... probably gave you the vibe that I wasn't open to it. Like how I tried to set you up with girls all the time back in high school. Jennifer Hayes, Krista O'Donnell, then - "

"Stephanie Kirkpatrick," finished Will, a huge smile creeping upon his lips. "Hawkins' very own Playboy model."

Mike laughed. "Yeah. God, what was I thinking? Setting you up with a girl who had a boob job at sixteen." He shook his head, searching Will's eyes for a sign of forgiveness, praying his apology was getting through to him somehow.

Then he realized he had to apologize to James, too.

He shifted his gaze towards him. "James... I just want to let you know I'm really sorry for being so rude to you yesterday. I promise you I'm not an asshole. I'm just... going through some shit right now. Finals had me on edge, my parents are divorcing... it doesn't excuse my behaviour towards you and Will in any way. I hope you can accept my apology."

James studied Mike for a moment, and Mike swore he could almost

see his cold front slowly melting away. A smile was beginning to form on his lips. He glanced at Will, placing a hand on his thigh. Will looked back at him, smiling brightly.

"Of course, Michael," he finally said. "Come on. Let's hug it out," he added, rising from his seat on the couch.

Mike felt like a thousand ton weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He walked over and leaned down to hug James, then embraced Will. He held Will for a long time, squeezing him as hard as he could.

"Love you, buddy," he whispered into his ear. "I'm happy for you." Will tightened his hold on Mike when he heard him say that.

"Love you, Mike." Mike released Will, and saw that he was crying. His eyes were puffy and red, and hot tears flowed down his cheeks.

Mike gave him a light shove. "Don't cry! You're gonna make me cry!" he chuckled, feeling the sting of tears beginning to form in the corners of his eyes.

Will laughed, too, and wiped the tears from his face. "They're happy tears."

"Awww, babe," said James, pulling Will closer to him.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to hear him say that," he said in a cracked whisper, sinking into James' chest.

Suddenly, it dawned on Mike how painful it must have been for Will to keep this secret from him. All these years of lying, and covering up the truth. Pretending to be interested when he and the rest of their friends spoke to him about girls. It must have been a really lonely place for him.

"No more secrets, okay, Will? I want you to feel like you can tell me anything. Always," said Mike.

Will nodded. "I promise, Mike. Never again. Friends don't lie," he added, referring to their old slogan from when they were kids.

Mike grinned. "And don't you forget it."

James was getting emotional, too, as he witnessed the heart-warming scene before him. He was beginning to like Mike more by the minute. "Thanks for coming over, Michael. I appreciate it," he said, glancing at Will, his eyes filled with joy and love.

Mike smiled at the both of them, and how happy they looked together. "Of course. I had to. Although I guess I should be going. I kind of crashed your peaceful morning, didn't I?"

"Not at all," assured Will. "What's the plan today? What are you up to?"

"Actually, I... I wanted to head over to the jewelry store to check out some engagement rings," he admitted, half-muttering.

Will and James' grabbed hold of one another at the same time, eyes wide. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Mike laughed, amused by their over-the-top reaction. "I wasn't going to say anything! It was supposed to be a surprise! But since we're in the theme of not keeping secrets from each other, I'm trusting you guys with this one." He offered James and Will a genuine smile.

Will and James and started bouncing up and down. "I can't believe it! I can't believe it! Oh my God, I've been waiting for this moment for years. Everyone's been waiting for this moment for years. Oh my God, I'm freaking out. I need a drink," he declared, running a hand through his hair.

James laughed. "Babe, it's eleven in the morning."

Will threw his arms around Mike. "Mike, I'm so excited! Congratulations! Ah, man," he said, resting his hands on his hips. An idea dawned on him, and his eyes grew wide again. "Can you please take us with you? I want to see the rings!"

James was on board immediately. "Oh my God, yes. We're coming with you. Nothing like the gays to help you decide on a fabulous engagement ring, trust me."

Mike laughed. Will being gay was already proving to be useful in it's own ways.

5. Chapter 5

Before heading to the jewelry store, Mike knew he had one more person to check off on his apology checklist. His mother. Today was Saturday, which meant she was off work. He drove home.

"Mom?" he called upon entering his house. He looked to his right, into the living room, and noticed that the lazy boy was gone.

"Mike!" It was Holly, running down the hall from the kitchen. She crashed into him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Hey, bug," he said, kissing the top of her head, then knelt down to look at her face. "How are you holding up?"

Holly shrugged, but the corners of her lips and eyes twisted downwards. "I'm okay. It's weird not to have him around. But he didn't do much, anyway."

Mike laughed bitterly. Holly was right. "So... where's he living now?"

"At Uncle Rick's house, in the basement," she replied. "It's like a big apartment down there."

Mike nodded. "Well, you can go see him whenever you want, bug. Just ask Mom, she'll drive you over anytime."

"That's what Mom said," she replied. "I'm okay. I'm glad you're home, though." Mike smiled at his little sister, and made a mental promise to himself to spend more time with her during the Holidays.

"Michael?" Karen made her way from the kitchen, dressed in flashy sports clothing.

"Mom," Mike said, rising to his feet. He took two steps towards her, and pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry," he said for the millionth time that day.

"Aw, honey, it's okay," she said, tightening her hold on him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. Nancy had no business telling you before I did."

Mike shook his head. "Please don't be mad at Nancy. I'm the one who asked her why Dad wasn't coming over. She just didn't want to lie to me."

Karen pressed her lips together as she considered this. "Okay."

"How are you holding up?" Mike asked.

Karen sighed. "I'm alright. I'm the one who decided to go through with it. You and Nancy are adults now, and you have your own lives. You don't need us to pretend to make it work anymore." She glanced down at Holly. "And Holly's a big girl. She understands. Right, sweetie?"

Holly nodded. "Of course, Mom."

Mike smiled down at his little sister. "So... what's going to happen? With the house?"

Karen sighed. "Well, your dad and I agreed that I could keep the house until Holly turned 18. Then... we'll sell it, I guess."

Mike nodded. So nothing would change, really. It's not like Ted was ever really present, even when he was. He wouldn't talk. He barely even moved, except to go to work. And he was getting even worse with age, too. A grumpy old man who would live in his brother's basement for the rest of his life. Mike felt sorry for him.

"I'm happy for you, Mom," he declared. He meant every word - Karen was a caring, beautiful woman. She was still young. He knew she would find someone eventually who would deserve her. Even in a small town like Hawkins.

Karen smiled at her son. "Thanks, baby. I feel good." She motioned to her outfit. "I just got the new Cher workout cassette! Holly and I were about to try it out, right, Hol?"

Mike laughed. That explained the flashy sports gear.

"Want to join us, Mike?" asked Holly excitedly.

"Uh, no thanks, Hol. I'll leave you to it. I've actually got something to

do today. It's kind of important."

"Something important? Sounds mysterious," mused Karen, her interest piqued. "What is it, baby?"

"I can't really tell you guys at the moment," he replied. "But you'll know soon enough. I just wanted to come by and apologize to you first."

Karen smiled at her son. "Honey, that's very sweet of you. Apology accepted. And I'm glad you're okay with it. You know, your father and me."

"I just want you to be happy, Mom. You'll be fine."

"Yeah, you'll be fine, Mom," repeated Holly, glancing up at her mother.

Karen was touched. She looked to her two children with a loving expression on her face. "My babies. I couldn't do it without you," she told them, pulling them into a three-way hug.

Mike released himself from her grasp a moment later. "Okay, I love you mom, but I have to go pick Will and James," he said, excited for their secret trip to the jewelry store.

Karen beamed. "Aww, honey, I'm glad you guys patched things up already. Tell them I said hi, okay?"

"Okay," he said, stepping out the door. "I'll see you later."

"Oooh, I really like this one," said Will, pointing out a square-shaped, 2-carat pink diamond ring.

"Me too," James agreed immediately. "Love the cut, love the color. Love it."

Mike peered over the glass display to examine it. "It's nice... but I feel like it's not really El's style. Although she does love pink."

"Right," said Will. "We have to think small, and simple."

"Small, and simple, eh?" said the jeweler from the other end of the counter as he made his way towards them. He looked between the three of them, visibly confused. "So, which one of you is getting married?"

Getting married. The statement hit Mike like a ton of bricks, although he was the one who had decided to come looking for an engagement ring. But it felt right. It was exciting.

"I am," he answered. "Well, I sure hope so."

The jeweler laughed. Then, his facial expression grew serious as he studied Mike. "Hey, I know you. You're Karen and Ted's kid!"

"I am," Mike repeated. "Mike Wheeler. Nice to meet you, sir," he added, sticking his hand out to the older man.

The jeweler shook it, still staring at Mike in disbelief. "Francis Warner. The last time I saw you, you were about this high," he said, his hand hovering about four feet off the ground. "Unbelievable how time flies. How old are you, son?"

"I'll be 21 in March, sir."

"21. I think I'd give up my left kidney to go back to that age," he said, chuckling. "Awfully young to be getting married, though. You sure about your decision?"

"They've been together for 7 years, sir," interjected Will, mildly insulted at his remark.

"And counting," added Mike. "She's the one. Absolutely no doubt about that in my mind."

Mr. Warner beamed back at him. "No time to waste then, huh?"

Mike smiled back at the older man, pleased that he understood. "Exactly."

"Okay, well you said small and simple. I've got this one right here," he added, pointing to a small, oval-shaped 0.04 carat diamond ring.

"No, the silver band is tacky," said James, shaking his head in disapproval. "You want a gold band. Eleven has a warm undertone. It'll suit her much better."

Mike looked back at the ring, confused. He hadn't ever considered such a thing as El's undertone. He wasn't even sure he knew what that meant.

"Okay," he said. "If you say so."

"Eleven? Are you talking about the Sheriff's daughter, the one that sued Hawkins National Laboratory a few years ago?" interrupted the jeweler, curious.

"Yes," said Mike.

The older man nodded. "Saw her in the paper. Beautiful girl. Made a small fortune off the lawsuit, didn't she? Good for her. Never trusted that institution for a minute. I knew they were shady from the moment they stepped foot in this town."

Mike laughed. He was liking Francis Warner more and more every minute.

"Well, since you may have a greater budget than I'd originally thought, you might want to go with this one," he proposed, pointing to a smaller, square-shaped diamond ring. It had a thin gold band, and the diamond had a very subtle pink tinge to it.

"1 carat," Mr. Warner declared. "Beautiful."

"Agreed," said Will. "May we see it, sir?"

"Of course." He reached inside the glass display to retract the ring, and handed it to Mike. James and Will swarmed over him immediately.

"Gorgeous. Love it," said James.

Mike felt the ring in his hand. "It's not too heavy, not too light."

"Let me see," said Will, snatching it from Mike's hand. He studied it in

awe for a moment. "Mike, it's perfect. Seriously. I think she'll love it."

Mike produced one of El's rings from his back pocket. "I, uh... I actually stole this from her jewelry back home so you can adjust the size."

Mr. Warner smiled proudly at him as he took the ring. "You came prepared, son."

Mike nodded. "I've put a lot of thought into this, sir," he replied, smiling back at him. "How much for the ring?"

"It's priced at 7,000\$," informed the older man. "But I'll give you my 20% employee discount. Because I like you, son. So, it should come about to 5,600\$"

"Sold," said Mike. Between the college fund his parents had saved up for him, his 10,000\$ science program scholarship he'd received from Hawkins High, El's lawsuit money, a part-time job back in California, and the fact that he'd be making roughly 100 000\$ per year as a computer engineer less than two years from now - not to mention that El was graduating from her nursing program in the spring - Mike knew he could more than easily afford the 5,600\$ ring.

He produced his wallet from his back jeans pocket. "Do I pay you now, or later?"

"Let me adjust the size first. I'll call you when it's ready. You can pay me then," explained the older man. "Do you need it in time for a Christmas proposal?"

The proposal. Mike hadn't even thought about how he was going to do it.

Suddenly, Will's eyes grew wide, and he clutched both Mike and James' arms excitedly. "Oh my God, let's throw a New Year's/surprise engagement party at my place. Or your place, Mike - whichever. Just all of our friends, something casual. We have the rest of the family on standby. Then, you pop the question at the stroke of midnight, and have your folks, my folks, and Nancy and Jonathan come in as a surprise after she says yes, and then we can all celebrate together!"

Mike looked at James, and James looked back at him.

"Actually, that sounds amazing, Will," said Mike. He could already picture the whole thing. El would never expect it. It was the perfect way to ring in the New Year, and the perfect occasion to celebrate their engagement with their friends and family.

Will beamed at them, beyond proud of his plan.

"Good job, babe," said James, kissing Will on the cheek. Will blushed.

"Okay. I'm gonna go talk to my mom and see if we can have the party at my place," said Mike. "I think it'll do her some good to have people over at the house. Put some life back into it, you know?"

"Deal," said Will. "Your house is bigger, anyway."

6. Chapter 6

"Mike..."

"Mike."

Mike had to make a substantial effort to pry his eyes open. El was sitting on his hips, her smiling face hovering inches above his.

"Merry Christmas," she declared excitedly, kissing his neck.

"Merry Christmas," he croaked. "What time is it?"

"8:00. Figured you might want to take a shower before everyone gets here," she replied, brushing her fingers across his chest.

"No," he groaned. The one thing he hated about Christmas morning was getting up early.

"Come on," prodded El, poking him in the chest. "You'll be glad I made you do it."

Mike didn't respond, and dug his face into his pillow as deep as he could.

"Mike..."

Suddenly, Mike grabbed her by the hips and flipped her on her back. El squealed as he pinned her down on the bed, and moved his body on top of hers.

"Do I have to tickle you?" he asked.

"No!" she replied, laughing hysterically.

"Are you sure about that? Because you're kind of annoying," he said, poking her in the ribs. El kicked and squealed some more.

"Stop, stop!"

"You stop," he replied, poking her some more. "Good morning, El."

Merry Christmas El." She twisted and turned, trying to fend him off, to no avail.

"Don't make me use my powers on you," she threatened while trying to catch her breath.

Mike feigned a shocked face. "You would never."

El wiggled her eyebrows. "Wanna bet?"

Mike leaned down to kiss her. El stopped struggling immediately, placing her hands on the nape of his neck to pull him closer, deepening the kiss. Mike moved to her neck, leaving a trail of kisses as he made his way downwards on her body, lifting her tank top to kiss her stomach. El tried to stifle a moan when he reached up to cup her breast, and Mike had to lean over to silence her with a kiss.

They jumped when someone knocked at the door.

"Knock, knock! Mike, your mother and sisters are here!" called Joyce's cheerful voice.

Mike pressed his face into El's stomach. "Damn it," he muttered, his lips vibrating against her skin.

She giggled, running a hand through his hair. "We'll be out in a sec, Mom!"

"Okay, sweetie!"

El lifted Mike's head with her hands. "Come on, let's get ready. We can do it later."

Mike couldn't hide his disappointment. "Okay," he conceded in defeat. El slithered out from under him and kissed his cheek as she bounced off the bed and left the room.

Mike grabbed some clothes and went to shower. When he came out of the bathroom, his mom, Holly, and Nancy were in the living room, arranging their gifts under the tree.

"Merry Christmas," said Nancy, extending her arms out to him.

Mike gave her a hug. "You too, Nance."

Holly rushed over and wrapped her arms around her siblings' legs. "Me too!"

Mike laughed, ruffling her hair. "Merry Christmas, bug."

Jonathan made his entrance, carrying more gifts over from the car. He shook the snow out of his hair.

"Hey, Mike. Merry Christmas, brother," he said, extending his hand out to him.

"Hey, Jonathan, Merry Christmas. Jesus, how many gifts did you guys bring?"

"Come to the kitchen, everyone!" called Joyce from the kitchen. "Breakfast is ready!"

After they finished up breakfast, it was time to open the gifts. As usual, Hopper was to hand out the gifts, dressed in his Santa Suit. Seeing him in the suit was lowkey Mike's favorite part of Christmas Day.

"Ho, ho, ho," boomed Santa Hopper. He grabbed the biggest gift from under the tree. "To Holly, from Mike and Eleven," he read in his best Santa voice, and deposited the enormous box in front of her.

Holly's eyes widened. She looked at Mike and El excitedly. "God, it's huge! What is it?"

"Open up," said Mike.

Holly tore the paper open in a matter of seconds, revealing a box that contained a deconstructed wood vanity that included a mirror adorned with light bulbs all around it. The vanity had three drawers. Below the box was a small plush purple stool.

"So you can have a place to do you hair and makeup," explained El.

Holly beamed at them. "It's beautiful! Thank you so much!" She

hopped across the living room to give them a hug, then returned to sit on her stool, admiring the box.

"We'll set it up together this afternoon. What do you think?" asked Mike. Holly nodded excitedly, overjoyed at the thought of spending time with her brother.

"Guys," whispered Karen, who was sitting next to them on the couch. "It's too much. You didn't have to."

"Mom, it's okay."

Santa Hopper resumed his position. "Ho, ho, ho. To Joyce, from Jim. I don't know who this Jim fellow is, and I don't know why he's sending presents to my wife. I'm going to have to kick his butt after my shift, right Mrs. Claus?"

Everyone laughed as Joyce accepted her gift from Hopper. It was a brand new set of pots and pans.

"Oh, Jim," she breathed, examining the box. "Exactly the ones I wanted. You remembered?"

"Santa's got one hell of a memory, hun," he said, reaching down to give her a kiss.

The number of gifts under the tree began to dwindle as Hopper handed them out to their designated recipients, round after round. Nancy had gotten Jonathan some new equipment for his job, while Jonathan had gotten her an remote car starter and brand new mags for her BMW 3. Joyce had gotten Hopper a brand new lawn-mower and some clothes. Karen Holly got some make-up, more make-up, and a DIY friendship bracelet kit.

"Ho, ho, ho," declared a much less enthusiastic Santa Hopper after 20 rounds of gifts. "To El - Love, Mike."

Eleven accepted the medium-sized rectangular gift from Hopper, glancing curiously over at Mike as she tore the wrapping paper apart.

"Oh my God," gasped El, Nancy, Karen, Joyce, Will and James at the same time when the gift was finally revealed.

"What is it?" asked a curious Holly, crawling over from her place on the ground next to Will and James.

"Mike," El breathed. "Louboutins?! Do they even sell these here yet?"

Mike smiled proudly, barely containing his excitement. "Bought them back in San Francisco. Try them on."

El removed the sleek, signature red-bottomed black heels from their box. She kicked off her slippers and put on her new shoes. They fit her like a glove.

"Eleven, they look amazing," said Nancy.

"Gorgeous. 10/10," agreed James, studying the heels. "Absolutely sickening."

El did a turn on herself. She couldn't peel her eyes away from her shoes, a permanent smile plastered across her face. "Wonder if I'm allowed to wear these to the hospital? Can't you just picture me in scrubs, with my Louboutins?" Everyone laughed at her joke.

"The most fabulous nurse in the entire state of California," declared Will.

"There's something else," said Mike. "Santa?"

Hopper scanned the remaining two gifts and quickly handed El a smaller box.

"Okay, seriously, Mike," she said. "It's too much."

"Open it," he replied simply.

She cast him a look as she ripped off the paper. It was a jewelry box. Inside it lay a thin diamond necklace.

"Mike..." she whispered. Everyone in the room leaned in closer to see.

Mike stood up. "I'll put it on for you."

The four inch heels gave her quite a boost in height, but Mike still

towered over her. He peeled the necklace from its box. "Move your hair," he instructed her. El pushed her shoulder-length hair to the front, as Mike fastened the necklace.

Everyone gasped.

"You look like a model," said Holly. El beamed at her. She turned to face Mike.

"Wow," he breathed, holding her at arms length to study her. "You look... perfect."

El looked down, blushing as she tucked a strand of stray hair behind her ear. "I... I don't know what to say, Mike. Seriously. It's too much."

"It's not. You deserve it," he told her softly, lifting her chin up with two fingers to give her a sweet kiss. El snaked her arms around his neck, leaning into the kiss, not caring that everyone else was watching. Everyone *awed* and *ooohed*, which would have embarrassed her, had she not been too happy to care at the moment.

"I got something for you, too," she said, her eyebrows shooting upwards. She turned to Hopper. "Santa, hit me."

Hopper handed El a two-box set present, which she handed to Mike. They both sat back down on the couch, and Mike began ripping the paper on the first box. She felt like a superstar when she crossed her legs, her Louboutins gleaming in the light as she angled her body towards Mike,

It was a Rollex watch.

"El, holy crap." He removed the Rollex from its box, and El fastened it around his wrist. It was a shiny black, and very modern-looking.

"You like it?" asked El.

"I love it," he responded. "I can't believe you got me a Rollex. Seriously." He studied his wrist, then showed it off to the rest of his family for everyone to see.

"Do I look classy?" he asked Holly, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

Holly giggled. "Very."

"Open the other box," she instructed.

Mike obeyed, ripping the paper on the larger box.

His mouth fell open.

"What is it!" cried Will, peering over James' shoulder across the room.

"No way, El. No way. Not possible," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "A MacIntosh Powerbook?!"

"A *what now?*" asked Karen, laughing.

"Only THE best laptop that came out this year, Mom," said Mike, his eyes riveted to the box. He looked over at El. She looked almost as excited as he did.

"How did you even get your hands on one of these?" he asked her, removing the laptop from its box. "They sold out in like, two days!"

El's entire face lit up with pride. "I waited in line two hours before the store opened," she replied. "Remember that time I told you I had an early meeting with one of my teachers on a Saturday, back in October?"

"Yes," he said, smiling as the memory came floating back.

"Well, that was a lie," she admitted, grinning devilishly.

He put the laptop down and took her face in his hands to kiss her. "El, I don't even know how to thank you."

She leaned in to kiss him again. "You just did."

7. Chapter 7

It took Mike about an hour to set up Holly's vanity. When he had finally finished, he flicked on the switch, and the light bulbs around the mirror lit up. Holly gasped.

"There you go, bug," said Mike, placing his hands on his hips as he inspected his work.

"Mike, it's so pretty!" She immediately began to transfer her new makeup into her drawers, as well as her hair and nail accessories.

"Will you help me with my proposal speech, Hol?" asked Mike, grabbing a notepad and feathery pink pen from Holly's stationary on her nightstand. He took a seat on her bed, propping himself up against the wall.

"Um, YES," replied Holly, glancing at him excitedly through her vanity mirror as she continued to organize her makeup.

"Okay," he said, racking his brain as he tried to figure out where to start.

"Can I play with your hair?" asked Holly. "Nancy got me these cute, glittery butterfly clips."

Mike sighed. "Okay, sure," he conceded, moving himself to the center of Holly's bed, and folded his legs over indian-style. Holly kneeled behind him, and started to section his hair with clips, twisting it here and there.

"El, I knew from the moment I met you that you were the one," he started. "No - too cheesy. Eleven, the first time I saw you, I had no idea what crazy adventure lied ahead of us..."

"I like that," said Holly. "But you should say, *from the moment I found you in the woods*. Because it's cute that you're the one who found her."

Mike nodded. "Right." He cleared his throat. "Eleven, when I found you in the woods, that rainy November night, I had no idea what crazy adventure lied ahead of us."

"Perfect," Holly weighed in, as she continued to twist Mike's hair into knots, pinning it down with her butterfly clips.

A knock at the door. Karen peered her head inside Holly's room.

"Honey, Will - "

When she spotted Mike with the butterfly clips in his hair, she lost it.

"What? Don't I look beautiful?" he asked his mother, batting his eyelashes as he struck a pose.

"I have to get my camera," she wheezed, clutching her stomach as she disappeared into the hallway. She returned, moments later, with the brand new camera El and Mike had just gotten her for Christmas.

"Smile!" She tried to steady herself, but lost it once again when Mike made a seductive face. Hot tears flowed down her cheeks. Mike couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Karen laugh like that, and it made his heart swell to see her happy.

"Whew, okay," said Karen, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "Honey, I just came by to tell you that Will called. He said he'd be coming over with some decorations for your engagement party."

"Sounds good," replied Mike. "Thanks, Mom."

"Okay, then. I'll leave you to it," she said, barely able to keep a straight face as she closed the door.

"Okay, where were we..." mused Mike, glancing down at his paper. "Right."

"Okay, all done!" declared Holly. "Do you think... I could paint your nails, Mike?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Hol, come on. No."

Holly pouted. "I'll remove it right after, I promise. You won't even know it was there. I just want to practice on someone else."

"Don't you have Mom and Nancy for this kind of stuff?"

"You have bigger nails," she lied. "It's a... different kind of practice."

Mike gave her a suspicious look. Holly was a terrible liar.

"Plus, Nancy is really busy these days. And when she's not busy studying here, she's with Jonathan."

Mike sighed. "Okay."

"Yes!" she exclaimed, running to her vanity to retrieve a bright purple varnish, her favorite color. "I'm gonna start with your toes, so you can use your hands."

"Alright, but I have to work on my speech, okay? So just... concentrate on your work, and stay quiet for a minute."

"Promise."

Mike returned to his draft. "You stood there, soaked and alone, and I immediately felt the need to protect you. This mysterious, bald little girl..."

"Are you really going to say she was bald?"

Mike groaned, considering his little sister's input. "You're right. Guess not."

Another knock at the door. Mike put his pen and paper down, exasperated by the constant interruptions. No wonder he couldn't come up with anything decent.

"Yeah?"

Will opened the door, with James in tow. They took in the scene before them, and immediately burst into a fit of laughter.

"Oh my God," cried Will. "Priceless. Beautiful, Mike."

"Welcome to the community," teased James, gasping for air. "You know, when you said you were open..."

Mike made a face. "Yeah, yeah. Have your laugh, you two."

Around 8 pm, Mike returned to the Buyers' house, finally content with his proposal speech. Will and James had stayed over for dinner at the Wheeler house, after spending the afternoon with him and Holly, making friendship bracelets and helping Mike with his speech, as well as planning the engagement party.

"Hey, you," said El, removing her glasses and setting her book down when Mike walked into the room.

"Hey," he replied, sitting down beside her.

"Did you have fun with Holly?"

"Yeah. She painted my nails, did my hair. Then we made friendship bracelets," he said, showing off his purple and yellow bracelet.

El's eyebrows shot up, her face lighting up with amusement. "Hair and nails. Wow. I can't believe I missed that."

"Don't worry, my mom took a picture. You know she was all over that."

El laughed. "Remind me to ask her for a copy of it."

"No, I won't," he replied, grinning. "Hey, where is everyone? All the lights were out when I came in."

"They're having dinner at my aunt Catherine's house tonight. And Jonathan is out with your sister with friends."

Mike's eyes widened. "Are you saying you've been alone here for hours, and didn't tell me?"

El laughed. "Mike, you were spending time with your family. It's okay." She shifted her leg over his body to straddle him.

"We still got time. Besides, I have a surprise for you," she whispered into his ear seductively, and kissed his neck.

Mike bunched her oversized t-shirt in both hands. "God, I love when you say that."

"It's a Christmas surprise."

"What is it?" he begged, reaching under her shirt to place his hands on her hips. He needed to touch her body.

"Close your eyes."

Mike obeyed, but it killed him. He felt her get off him in one swift motion.

"Where are you going? Get back here!"

"Just hold on." He thought he heard clothes fall to the floor.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"Yes."

Mike opened his eyes. El stood before him wearing a sheer red corset, complete with a red lace thong and a black garter belt and knee high sheer stockings.

And of course, her Louboutin heels. The cherry on top.

"El..."

"You like it?" she asked in her most seductive voice, doing a turn on herself. Nothing beat his facial expressions whenever she got new lingerie. He made her feel sexy, even without saying a word.

Mike just sat there, gaping. He extended his hand out to her.

"Get. Over. Here."

El giggled as she slipped off her shoes and took his hand. He yanked her closer to him, closing in the distance between them in less than a second. She straddled him once again, and he kissed her, placing one hand behind her neck and one hand at the small of her back.

"You. Are. So. Gorgeous," he told her, in between kisses. His mouth was running wild on her body. El moaned in delight, tightening her grip on the nape of his neck.

"I swear, you kill me with these outfits, El."

"Mike, I love you, but shut up and make love to me."

He flipped her over in a second, moving on top of her. El squealed in delight.

"Won't need to tell me that twice."

8. Chapter 8

Mike examined himself in the mirror as he fastened the remaining buttons on his blouse. Good enough. He took a deep breath, and walked over to his bed, reaching under the mattress to retrieve the small box that contained El's ring. He opened the box to inspect it one more time, and hoped El would love it as much as he thought she would.

A knock at the door. Mike's snapped the box shut and pocketed the ring in a flash. Eleven opened the door, dressed in a simple, but classy little black dress, which was complemented by her new heels and the diamond necklace Mike had gotten her for Christmas. Her wavy brown hair was parted to the side with a rhinestone pin. Her lips were coated with a deep shade of red.

Mike looked at her and wondered if she had ever looked more beautiful. "Wow. You look stunning."

El smiled, pulling him gently towards her by his collar. "*You're* the stunner," she replied, flattening his blouse around his chest and shoulder area, then kissed him on the cheek, leaving a big red mark. She groaned, wiping stain away with her thumb. "I keep forgetting I'm wearing lipstick."

"It looks great. You look great. Especially with the shoes," said Mike, glancing down at her red-bottomed Louboutins.

El beamed. "I know. They're amazing. Hey, Lucas and Dustin just got here. Max and her date should be here any minute. I'm going back, okay?"

"I'll be out in a sec," he replied, fixing his collar.

When she had gone, Mike turned to look at himself in the mirror one last time. "Okay. This is it," he told his reflection, patting the ring box in his back pocket.

Will and James had spent the entire afternoon decorating the Wheeler house. It was covered top-to-bottom in glittery garlands and

streamers, sparkly hanging decorations of all sorts, and confetti-filled balloons - all black, red, and gold, which made for a very classy look. In the living room, Will and James had put up a huge three-part sign they'd hand-crafted themselves that read *Welcome To The Party!* However, the middle part of the sign was reversible, and on the flip side were the words *To El and Mike's Engagement*. At midnight, Will would flip the midsection to reveal the full sign that read *Welcome To El and Mike's Engagement Party!* Mike thought it was clever, but risky, and hoped El wouldn't pay too much attention to it until the time came for the big reveal.

The only three people who knew about the real purpose behind the New Year's party was Holly, James, and Will. Mike had decided to leave everyone else in the dark. The less people knew, the better. The last thing he wanted was for El to find out. And as much as he loved his friends, they couldn't keep a secret if their lives depended on it.

"Mike, my man," greeted Dustin when Mike appeared in the kitchen, a devilish grin on his face. "Walk with me for a minute. I'm getting a beer in the cooler."

Mike followed Dustin outside to his back porch. He reached inside the cooler, grabbed a beer for himself, and handed one to Mike. He made sure the patio door was shut properly.

"Jesus, dude - you're proposing?!" Dustin exploded, shoving him playfully in the chest.

Mike almost choked on his beer. He glanced towards the kitchen through the patio door. Everyone was hanging around, laughing and talking, thankfully completely oblivious to Dustin's outburst.

"Relax, no one heard. And these perfect lips are sealed," he said, making a zipping motion with his fingers. "Well, I did tell Lucas. Cause it's big news, you know. Huge."

Mike opened his mouth to protest, but Dustin cut him off.

"Trust me, El has no idea," reassured Dustin. A huge grin spread across his face. "I'm just so happy for you guys!" he whispered, giving Mike a quick hug.

Mike smiled back at him. "Thanks, Dustin."

When they returned to the kitchen, the doorbell rang. It had to be Max. El was in the middle of a conversation with Lucas, so Mike went to answer the door.

"Mike!" greeted Max, reaching up to give him a hug.

"Hey, Max." Mike's eyes shifted to the tall guy standing next to her. He had long, dirty blonde hair that was tied in a low ponytail. His arms were twice the size of Mike's. A tattoo of a heart with an arrow across it peeped from under his hair, on the left side of his neck.

"Mike, this is Kevin," introduced Max, her entire face lighting up as she cast an upwards glance at her date. "Kevin, this is my best friend's boyfriend, Mike."

Kevin shook Mike's hand in an iron grip, and Mike had to steady himself. "Nice to meet you, man."

"Kevin, nice to meet you," replied Mike. "Thanks for coming. Come on in, guys."

Lucas' face fell when he saw Max and Kevin walk into the kitchen, and immediately stopped the conversation he was having with El.

"Everyone, this is Kevin. Kevin works as a model in L.A.," she boasted proudly, placing a hand on his chest. Lucas didn't even try to hide his disappointment.

"Hey, guys," said Kevin, waving at everyone.

They broke the ice by asking him questions about how he and Max had met. Max explained that they were *just friends*, and that they'd met two months ago during Max's sponsorship photoshoot with the skateboard brand *Birdhouse*, back in L.A. Mike and El took the opportunity to talk about their life in California; how different it was from Hawkins, what they liked and didn't like about it, etc. Although Mike thought Kevin was friendly, he could tell his presence annoyed the living crap out of Lucas. On the contrary, James and Will seemed to be smitten with him. They laughed at all his jokes and kept questioning him about his modeling career. Will even touched his

bicep once or twice. Kevin didn't seem to notice. He only had eyes for Max.

"You guys want to play a drinking game?" Kevin asked. Mike glanced at the clock. It was 10:45 - they still had time. "It's called beer pong, have you guys ever played?"

Lucas scoffed. "Everyone knows, beer pong, man. It's been around since before we were born." They all turned to look at him, and Max glared at him. These were the first words he'd spoken since Kevin and Max had arrived.

"Cool, let's do it," said Kevin, indifferent to Lucas' smug attitude. "Mike, you and me versus the girls?"

"Sounds good," said Mike. "I've never played, though."

"Me neither," admitted El, glancing sheepishly at Lucas.

"Yeah, I've never played either," said James. "Will?" Will shrugged, and turned to Dustin.

"I played once, with Lucas... I think?" he asked, glancing at Lucas. Lucas just shook his head, exasperated at his friends' ignorance.

"It's easy. Both teams make a pyramid of 15 beer-filled cups. Each teammate takes their turn to throw the ping pong ball across the table into their adversaries' cups. You get the ball in a cup, they drink. Last team standing wins," Kevin explained. Mike and El glanced at each other and nodded. Fairly simple.

"Lucas, you want to help me find some ping pong balls in the basement?" asked Mike. The truth was, he wanted a moment to talk to Lucas alone. "Kevin, can you help the girls get some beer? It's in the cooler outside."

"I know what you're going to say," said Lucas as they descended into the basement. "So don't say it."

"Well, I'm still going to," replied Mike. He turned to face him. "Dude. You dumped her. Twice. What's with the jealousy?"

Lucas scoffed. "You think I'm jealous of that *viking*?"

"What is it, then?"

Lucas kicked a soccer ball out of the way. "I wasn't expecting her to bring someone, that's all. I was kind of hoping we could... I don't know. Reconnect tonight."

Mike rolled his eyes as he moved a few boxes out of the way. "And by that, you mean hook up, right?"

Lucas glanced down at his feet. "Well... yeah. But it's more than that. Not only is she physically beautiful in that smoking hot redhead kind of way. She's like, the most badass chick I've ever met in my life. She's... different, you know. She's tough. Independent."

Mike sighed. "Lucas, you say that everytime." He opened a box that had *SPORTS GEAR* written across it, and scavenged through it to retrieve four ping pong balls, handing two to Lucas.

"I know it's hard to hear, but you need to hear it anyway. You had her, you were a jerk. Then you won her back, and you let her go again. Being in a relationship is a ton of work, man. You can't just expect it to be sunshine and rainbows all the time. I just don't think you're ready for it."

Lucas opened his mouth to protest, but Mike cut him off.

"Look, that doesn't have to be a bad thing. If you want to be single and not commit, then you do that. But you have to stop hurting her, man. Stop dragging her into your mess when you have no idea what you want."

Lucas seemed mildly offended at his remark, but deep down, as much as it pained him to admit it, he knew Mike was telling the truth.

"Just let her be happy," continued Mike. "And if you wake up one year, two years from now and realize you miss her and she's the one - and you're ready to settle down and stop messing around - then you go get her, man. Simple as that. But you need to stop screwing with her."

Lucas nodded, considering his friend's advice. "Wise words from the relationship expert."

Mike laughed. "I'm not an expert."

"Nah, you are, man," insisted Lucas. "Just seeing you with El for all these years... it's inspiring. Although you make the rest of us look bad." The corners of his lips turned upwards.

Mike smiled back at him. "Every relationship is different. Me and El... it's just always been so easy. It's like we're two parts of the same person. We don't even need words to communicate sometimes. She just gets me. And I get her."

"There's a word for that - it's called soulmates," said Lucas. Mike smiled at him.

"I'm stoked about your engagement, Mike. You deserve it. I know you guys are going to lead a long, happy life together. And I'm here for it."

"Thanks, Luke."

"Plus... I guess you're right about Max. And about me," continued Lucas, letting out a frustrated sigh. "But that don't mean I have to like the guy."

Mike laughed. "No, it doesn't. Come on, let's go back upstairs before El comes looking for us."

They returned to the kitchen, and Mike took his position beside Kevin to play against Max and El. Will and James were rooting for the guys (or rather, Kevin), whereas Dustin and Lucas were cheering for El and Max. The girls took it by a landslide.

"Beginner's luck," said Kevin.

It was Dustin and James vs. Lucas and Will after that. Then the girls wanted to play again.

"Okay, but let's do half cups," proposed Mike. "Don't want to get too drunk too fast." The last thing he wanted was for El to be wasted for

the big moment. He looked over at her - she seemed to be handling herself just fine for now. She was tipsy, at most.

"Boo, Mike," said Max, downing her cup. "It's New Years. Lighten up." Mike had to bite his tongue.

This time, Kevin and Mike won against the girls. At 11h50, Mike was rinsing out the beer cups and cleaning up the kitchen table when Will appeared behind him to inform him that their families were parked out in the street, waiting for the signal. Mike felt his heartbeat quicken instantly.

Everyone else was in the living room, chatting and listening to music. Mike went to stand next to El, glancing at the clock every twenty seconds. He felt like his knees were about to give out. The ring box burned in his back pocket. Will and James were staring at him, smiling like crazy as they sipped their rum and cokes.

At 11:57, Mike took El's hand and pulled her towards the center of the room.

"Everyone, there's something I'd like to say," declared Mike in a shaky voice. Will turned down the music immediately. El gave him a confused look, waiting for him to go on.

"I just wanted to thank everyone for coming over and ringing in the New Year with us," continued Mike. "But it's not the only reason that you guys are here." He glanced at the clock one last time. 11:58.

"El," he said, taking her hands in his as he turned to face her. "From the moment I found you in the woods, that rainy November night, eight years ago, I knew you were special. But I had no idea what crazy adventure lied ahead of us. And I wasn't expecting to fall in love, so hard and so quickly, at such a young age. But it happened. And I'm so glad it happened, because it gave me purpose. You gave me purpose. You gave my life a meaning I never dreamed I'd have. Not only do you make me a better man, day in, and day out - you complete me. You're my best friend and my soul mate. And I can't imagine my life without you by my side."

El was looking back at him in complete shock. Tears began to form in

her eyes when she realized what was happening. "Mike...?"

"Which is why," he continued, bending down on one knee as he reached for the box in his pocket. "I want to spend every day of the rest of my life trying to make you as happy as you make me." He flipped open the box.

"Oh my God, Mike!" El gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Jane Hopper Ives," he stated. "Will you do me the immense pleasure of becoming my wife?"

El looked into Mike's eyes, tears flowing down her cheeks. "Yes," she choked out. "Of course, Mike. Yes!"

Everyone began to clap and hoot as Mike secured the ring around her finger with shaky hands. El's jaw fell to the ground as she studied her new ring. Mike got to his feet, and El threw her arms around him as she continued to cry. Mike was crying, too. Then he took her face in his hands and kissed her. At that moment, Karen, Holly, Nancy, Jonathan, Hopper and Joyce all came barging through the front door.

"Congratulations!" they all yelled at the same time. Will pulled on a hidden string and the *Welcome To El and Mike's Engagement Party!* sign was revealed.

El buried her face in her hands and doubled over, overcome with emotion. "Oh my God, you guys!" she cried, wiping the tears from her face. Everyone rushed over to give them a hug and congratulate them.

And it was the new best moment of her life.

9. Chapter 9

10 DAYS LATER

On any regular day, Eleven would have enjoyed the heat of the California sun on her skin as she made the three-block journey from the drug store to the library. She loved the sun and heat. But this wasn't a regular day, and the scorching heat was only making her nausea so much worse. The whole point of walking to the library instead of driving had been to clear her head and get some fresh air, but the nausea and dizziness were only reminding her of what she was desperately trying to ignore.

Namely, the positive pregnancy test burning a hole inside her purse.

How could this have happened? *How?* She'd been taking the pill every day, like clockwork, for years. She racked her brain trying to remember which day she could have forgotten in the past month, and couldn't think of one. Didn't the pill advertise itself to be over 99% effective?

Just my luck, thought El bitterly.

What was she going to do? What was she going to tell Mike? God, Mike still had another two years of school to go. They couldn't have a baby now. College aside, El didn't feel ready to have a baby. Neither did Mike. The timing was all wrong. How could she let this happen!

She couldn't hold it down anymore. The slice of pizza she'd had for lunch was coming up, no matter how hard she tried to fight it. El spotted a dumpster in an alley between two buildings and ran to it, throwing up the entire contents of her stomach.

"God," she groaned, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She reached for the pack of gum inside her purse.

"Rough night?"

A man, in his forties or fifties, was standing on a balcony above her, smoking a cigarette as he studied El. She straightened herself out,

embarrassed.

If only, she thought. "Sorry about that. Have a nice day."

"Make sure to drink some water, honey," he called as she made her way back to the main road.

As if drinking water would fix her problem. If only this was a simple hangover.

She was even more dizzy, now that her stomach was empty, but at least the nausea had passed. For now. Thankfully, she was almost at the library. How on Earth would she be able to concentrate on her psych paper when she could barely concentrate on keeping her vision straight? El considered whether or not she should tell Jaclyn. Truth was, she desperately needed to talk to someone, and Jackie had been such a good friend to her ever since they'd met almost two years ago.

She wasn't going to have the abortion before telling Mike, even though she'd thought about it, just to spare him the stress and anxiety. No, she wanted to be 100% sure she was pregnant before telling him, which was why she was planning on calling the clinic today to set up an appointment as soon as possible. She hoped with every inch of her heart that the doctor would tell her this whole thing was just a scare. Then everything would go back to normal and she could just forget this ever happened.

"Jane, would you please just tell me what's on your mind?"

Jaclyn's voice snapped El out of her daze. She looked up from the empty paper she'd been staring at for the past 30 minutes and saw that Jackie was staring at her, a worried expression on her face.

"I know there's something wrong," whispered Jackie. "I'd just wish you'd tell me what it is."

El sighed, placing her pen down on the table. She put her face in her hands.

"Okay," she said. "But you have to promise not to tell. I'm serious, Jackie. Not one word."

Jackie snapped her *Human Memory: Theory and Practice* book shut and moved it to the side. "What is it?" she asked eagerly.

El glanced around the library. There was no one around, except for a small group of people three tables away that seemed to be laughing and chatting more than they seemed to be getting any actual work done.

"I might be pregnant," whispered El.

Jackie's eyebrows shot up. "Might be?"

"I took a test," replied El. "It came out positive." She thought of herself, two hours ago, peeing on a stick at the public restroom of her pharmacy. Originally, she'd planned to do it after her library session with Jaclyn, so she could focus on her school work. But the wait was killing her - she needed to know. Plus, there was no way she could hold her bladder that long.

Jaclyn's entire face lit up with joy. "Jane, that is so great!"

El looked back at her, baffled. "No, it's not."

"Why not? You guys just got engaged!"

Oh, God. They were. El was horrified at the thought that their friends and family would think they'd gotten engaged *because* she was pregnant, and pin the whole thing as a pathetic shotgun wedding. Another reason not to have the baby. She and Mike would *not* be that couple.

"It's not the right time, Jac. I'm not ready," she said.

"So? No one's ever ready for their first baby until they have it. You learn as you go."

El sighed, rubbing her face in her hands. This was not the kind of advice she'd anticipated.

"Does Mike know?"

"Not yet," admitted El. "I want to get confirmation at the clinic first."

"Good idea. Just to be 100% sure." Jackie reached over the table and squeezed El's hand. "I'm so happy, Jane!" She glanced at El's stomach, a look of pure joy on her face. "What do you think? Boy or girl?"

El's hand moved to her stomach as the image of a mini Mike with black, wavy hair and chestnut eyes flashed across her mind. She hadn't allowed herself to feel even a sliver of excitement thinking about these sorts of things, since she had no intention of keeping it in the first place. This pregnancy was nothing more than an ill-fated mistake with terrible timing. At the very best, the whole thing was a joke. But there was something about Jackie's excitement that destabilized her. The positive response she'd received from her friend had completely caught her off guard.

"I don't want to think about it, Jackie," she replied, pushing toddler Mike out of her mind. "I'm probably not going to keep it."

Jaclyn's expression turned to one of shock and horror. "What are you talking about? You can't have an abortion!"

"Jaclyn, I can't have a *baby*!" said El, whispering the last word almost a little too loudly. "Mike has two more years left at Berkeley! We are thousands of miles away from our family! I'm not even 21 yet!"

"Well, whatever," replied Jaclyn, piling her books together. "I think you should go home, schedule the meeting with the clinic, and get some rest. We can work on the final draft on Monday before psych. Come, I'll drive you home."

"Okay," agreed El, placing her notebook in her purse. "Good idea."

The ride to El and Mike's apartment was rather silent, and El wondered if she had offended Jackie by telling her she wanted to get an abortion. Was she against it? She was starting to regret her decision about opening up to her, thinking she should have called Max instead.

"Call me tomorrow, okay?" said Jackie as El shut the passenger door. "I want to know what's going on."

"Sure," replied El. "I'll let you know."

Jackie gave her a curt smile, waved, and drove off. El spotted the Mustang in their parking lot, which meant Mike was home. She glanced at the payphone next to her building.

Time to call the clinic.

The next day, El dialed Jackie's number from home.

"Jackie, it's Jane."

"Jane! So, what's happening?"

"I have a meeting at the clinic in half an hour. Mike's out for an oil change on the car, but he should be back any minute," she explained. "I told him we were meeting at the library to finish our paper."

Her heart seized in her chest at the thought of lying to Mike. Coming home from the library and pretending like everything was okay was hard, but straight up going behind his back and scheduling that doctor's appointment was even worse. The whole thing felt wrong. A part of her desperately wanted to wait for him to come home so she could tell him, and they could go together.

"Okay, want me to come pick you up?"

"No, it's okay, it's one block away," said El. "I'll call you after."

"After what?"

El frowned. "After my appointment," she clarified. "Wasn't it obvious?"

"Oh, I thought you were talking about the abortion for a second. Thank God." El glanced at her phone, slightly annoyed that she'd let Jackie feel so implicated in this potential pregnancy.

"Okay, well, see you soon," said Jackie before hanging up the phone.

El put her phone down, perplexed. Was Jackie acting weird or was she imagining it?

El got to her appointment 10 minutes early.

"Name," demanded the pink-haired, bubblegum-chewing receptionist, not tearing her eyes from her computer screen as El approached the front desk.

"Jane Hopper," replied El. The girl typed something on her keyboard.

"Have a seat."

"Okay," whispered El as she made her way over to the waiting area with shaky legs.

She glanced at the couple sitting directly in front of her. Her psych class came to mind as she studied their body language; their bodies angled inwards towards each other, their smiling faces, the guy's hand on her leg. Suddenly, she missed Mike terribly, and couldn't remember why she'd wanted to do this alone in the first place.

She got up from her chair, and decided to go talk to Mike instead.

Mike was at home when the buzzer rang. He thought El may have left one of her school books behind and forgotten her keys at the apartment. He pressed the button to let her in.

A knock at the door, which was strange. He looked through the magic eye. It was Jaclyn. Mike frowned, confused as he opened the door.

"Jaclyn, hi," greeted Mike. "I thought you and Jane were meeting at the library."

"May I come in for a second?" she asked, completely ignoring his last sentence. "There's something I'd like to tell you."

Mike was baffled. Was this a joke?

"Uh, okay," he replied, stunned. Jaclyn walked right in. She studied the picture frames El had set up in the entrance as she slowly made her way into the kitchen.

"Listen," she said, turning around to face him as she leaned on the kitchen island. "I've seen the way you look at me."

Mike blinked at her. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't lie to yourself, Michael. Jane's a nice girl and all, but... let's be honest. She's probably a little boring in bed."

That snapped him out of his daze. The nerve on this girl!

"Okay, you have to leave, Jaclyn," he told her, looking her dead in the eye. "Now."

Jaclyn pouted. "Okay. I'm sorry. That wasn't fair." She brushed her hand along the kitchen island as she made her way over to Mike.

"It's too bad you're so whipped, you know. We could have a lot of fun together. I have a thing for hot nerds," she whispered, inching closer to him.

Mike took a step back. "Jaclyn. Now. Go." He motioned towards the corridor.

Jaclyn took another step forward. "At least our child will have your genes," she said, scrutinizing every feature of his face. "I just wish I could have made him a sibling."

Mike looked back at her, stunned. Not only was he confused, he was now officially creeped out by this chick. He grabbed her by the arm and started leading her towards the door. "I don't know what kind of games you're playing, Jaclyn, but that's fucked up. You need help. Seriously."

Jackie whipped around and put her hands on his chest. "She doesn't have to know. Jane. She's keeping secrets from you too, you know."

Mike grabbed her wrists and pushed her off him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Jackie leaned inwards. "A kiss for a secret?" she whispered inside his ear.

Just as she placed her hand around his neck and turned her head to kiss him on the cheek, El walked in.

"What the hell?" She said, depositing her purse on the shoe rack. She glanced between Jackie and Mike, a look of hurt and confusion on her face.

Right then, Jackie swooped in and kissed Mike on the lips.

El's hands flew over her mouth as she watched the scene with shock and horror. Mike pushed Jackie away and locked eyes with El for a brief moment before she turned and ran out the door.

"El!" Mike screamed, running after her. "El, wait!"

He'd made it halfway down the hall before he felt a sharp sting in his back. He stopped, and turned to find a needle sticking out of his back.

"What the fuck?"

He barely had the time to remove it before he collapsed to the ground.

10. Chapter 10

"Son, can you hear me?"

Mike opened his eyes and immediately noted that he was lying face down on the floor. Why was his face pressed against the floor?

Crouched over him was a man in his early sixties. Mike immediately recognized him as Mr. Underwood, the retired man who lived four apartments down the hall with his wife, Edith.

"Michael, can you hear me?"

Mike tried to push himself off the ground in one swift movement, but halfway up his head began to spin, and he had to sit down for a minute.

"What happened to you, son?"

Mrs. Underwood was standing a bit further down the hall, peering over her husband, a concerned look on her face. Mike pressed the palm of his hand to his forehead. What had happened? He felt like the answer to that question was so close, yet so far inside his brain. He glanced behind him and saw the door to his apartment wide open, and just like that, his memory snapped right back into focus.

"El," he whispered, scrambling to his feet.

"El?!" he screamed once he was inside their apartment. He ran down the hallway and checked their bedroom. Empty. He checked the bathroom, also empty. He went outside on their balcony, and scanned the beach. There was no one, except for two guys sitting together in the distance and a couple of kids playing volleyball.

"Oh my God," he whispered, running a hand through his hair as he felt the panic swell in his chest at an exponential rate.

Mr. Underwood appeared in his entrance, a worried expression on his face. "Son, you had this in your hand," he said, handing him the empty needle. "What happened?"

Mike took it from him, placing it on the kitchen counter. "I don't know where Jane is, Mr. Underwood. We had a... fight, and I ran after her. But someone shot this needle in my back and I passed out."

Mr. Underwood looked back at Mike, baffled.

Mike tried to focus on his breathing. "I know who did it. I just need to find her."

Find her. Where was he going to find her address? It's not like he could check the phonebook. He didn't even know her last name.

El must have written it down somewhere in her notes. He ran to their bedroom and started tossing El's notebooks around until he unearthed her school agenda.

"Come on, come on," he whispered, flipping the pages with a trembling hand as he searched for her contacts page.

Jaclyn Currant. 1418 Elk Road, Apt. 16.

He ran to the phone and dialed 911.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Yes, my girlfriend is missing. Someone... kidnapped her, I think. They shot me with a tranquilizer, and I passed out trying to run after her," he blurted out, panicked.

"Your name, sir? And your girlfriend's name? When did this happen? And do you know why she would want to kidnap your girlfriend?"

Good question, thought Mike. Why would Jackie do such a thing?

"Michael Wheeler. Jane Hopper, I don't know," his eyes darted to the alarm clock on their nightstand as he tried to push through his hazy memory to remember the timeline of events. He'd come home from the oil change at 1:00 pm. Jaclyn showed up 15 minutes later. El showed up 5 minutes after that.

"Around 1:20 pm," he said. Damn. He'd been out 2 hours.

"Your address, sir?"

"611 Milton Road. But I know who did it. It's this girl from her school. Her name is Jaclyn Carrant," he informed the operator, and he proceeded to give her Jaclyn's address. "I need you to send someone to check out her apartment. Right now."

"Sir, we can't do that without a warrant. We don't even know for sure that this person really kidnapped your girlfriend. And seeing as Ms. Hopper has been gone for two hours, we can't declare her as missing yet."

"I FUCKING KNOW SHE DID IT, OKAY?" Mike screamed into the phone. "WHY ELSE WOULD SHE HAVE SHOT ME WITH A TRANQUILIZER?"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to keep your voice down -"

Mike hung up. He wasn't going to stay on the line for this bullshit. If the authorities weren't going to dispatch someone to raid Jackie's apartment, Mike was going to have to do it himself.

He was making his way to his car when El's purse caught his eye.

El's purse! She'd left it behind!

He slammed it down on kitchen island counter as he rummaged through it, trying to find anything that would help. He pulled out a familiar-looking white stick.

It was a pregnancy test. And it was positive.

Mike felt his knees start to give out and had to steady himself on the counter. For a moment, the world stopped turning. He stared at the pink plus sign, gripping the edge of the counter so tight his knuckles were beginning to turn white.

His heart raced. El was pregnant? Since when? Why hadn't she told him anything? He laughed, and tears he hadn't even felt coming fell down his cheeks. He couldn't take his eyes off the test. He was going to be a father!

His happy thoughts were interrupted when reality came crashing back to him in the form of Jaclyn's voice inside his head. *At least our child will have your genes.* Her hands on his chest. *She's keeping secrets from you too, you know.*

The memory hit Mike like a tidal wave. Mike leaned back on the counter, horrified as Jaclyn's true intentions became clear.

The crazy bitch was after their baby.

El woke up to pitch darkness. It took a few seconds for her to realize she was blindfolded. And bound to a chair by her hands and feet.

What is this, she thought, fear beginning to swell inside her as she searched for answers.

Then she remembered. Jackie. Mike. What that the last thing she remembered? No. She remembered making it to the first level of her apartment building. She remembered hearing Mike call her name behind her.

Then she remembered hitting the floor. That was it.

"Hello!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Hello!" she screamed again, desperately trying to yank her wrists free. "Jackie!"

She heard a door open in the distance.

"Ah, you're awake!" It was Jackie's voice, no doubt about it.

"Jaclyn, what is this?!"

"Jane. I'm sorry about how all that went down," she said, her heels clicking on the ground as she approached El.

"Jaclyn! Untie me!" El screamed.

"Can't, sweetheart."

El tried not to let the panic take over. She had to stay calm.

"Can you at least untie the blindfold so we can talk?"

Jaclyn laughed. "I can't do that either. Can't risk you using your powers on me. I fly across the room, pass out. God knows what could happen after that."

El was shocked. How did Jaclyn know about her powers? Sure, her telekinetic abilities had been revealed to the general public after her highly publicized trial against Hawkins Lab two years ago. Had Jackie known about her true identity this whole time and not said a word to her about it?

"How did you..."

"How did I know? Oh, Jane. We have a lot to talk about, you and I." El heard Jackie taking a few steps away from her. Then the scraping of a chair's legs on the ground along with the clicking of her heels as she returned.

"Mind if I call you Eleven? Now that we're being honest with each other..." When El didn't reply, Jackie went on.

"You see, Eleven, I've been watching you for a long time. I knew who you were a long time before we met," she continued. A clinking of plates being placed on a nearby table. Liquids being poured into receptacles. It was killing El not to be able to see what was going on.

Jackie paused. "I think you know my uncle. Dr. Martin Brenner..."

El felt herself stop breathing, her blood instantly turning cold inside her veins. Her heart was racing so fast and so hard, all she could hear was the deafening thump of it inside her ears.

A wave of nausea hit her hard. El turned her head to the side and vomited.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of that," said Jackie, as if El had a choice. "Your nausea is completely normal. The first trimester is usually pretty tough for most women." El felt a cold face cloth being pressed against her forehead.

"Have some water," said Jackie, pressing a glass against her lips. El turned her head away from it in dismissal.

Jackie sighed. "Eleven. I'm not going to poison you. I need that baby healthy," she said. "I can assure you that you're safe for the next nine months. Scout's honor."

My baby? Thought El.

"What?"

Jackie cleared her throat. "As I was saying. I'm a big fan of yours. My father and his brother were quite close. Twins usually are. Growing up, all I'd ever heard about was my uncle's hard work with the MKUltra project. And the amazing results it produced with the patients' children. Gifted with superhuman abilities, not one of them the same. His work with the paranormal and the other dimensions... he was the pride and joy of our family."

El fought the urge to cry. This couldn't be happening. This had to be a sick joke from the Lab in an effort to get back at her for the lawsuit.

"Anyway... I was fascinated. Every time I'd see him, I'd ask him about the children. What their abilities were. As a child, I saw him as a sort of Charles Xavier. And you all were his X-Men." She laughed at her clever comparison. "And I wanted to be one of you so bad - you in particular. You know why?"

El didn't answer.

"Because he talked about you all the time," she replied, leaning forward in her chair. "You were his favorite. Did you know that? He always spoke to us about his sweet, obedient Eleven. How powerful you were at such a young age. His most promising subject. But then, you ran away." She paused. "Why would you do that, El? Don't you know how powerful you could have become?"

Once again, El kept silent.

"Hawkins Lab was never the same after he died. Shame on them for throwing all my uncle's hard work out the window."

El sniffled, trying to regain a hold on herself. She couldn't cry. Not now. "What does any of that have to do with my baby?" she whispered.

"Ah, yes, of course. Sorry, I got carried away." Jaclyn took a sip of whatever she'd poured for herself. "I can't have children. You know, it's not physically possible for me. All the doctors confirmed it. There's something wrong with my uterus. So I figured I'd take yours. As an *homage* to my uncle. I've been watching you with Mike for a long time, how in love the two of you were. I figured it wouldn't be too long before he'd put a ring on it, and knock you up." She laughed. "And I was right. But I have a confession to make."

"What?"

"I've been swapping your pill packs for quite a while," she admitted. The words hit El like a ton of bricks. So that's how the pregnancy had happened.

"Once a month, I'd replace your pill prescription with a placebo. Whenever you'd go to the bathroom in class, I'd slip it inside your purse. Took you quite a while to get pregnant. I was surprised. Sixteen months, to be exact."

El began to cry again. She couldn't help it.

"It's why I enrolled in nursing school in the first place. To keep you close, you know? Figured the whole thing would be easier if I befriended you. And I learned some pretty handy things along the way. How to provide medical care for you and the baby during your pregnancy. Looking back, it was an excellent idea. Hey, we almost made it through the entire the program. Too bad you'll never graduate."

El's entire body shook with sobs as she thought of Mike. He was probably so worried about her.

"Mike," she whispered, her heart aching for him.

"Oh, about him," Jaclyn continued. "I'm sorry about what went down earlier. I couldn't help it. I wanted us to try and make a sibling for

our precious miracle... but he's got eyes only for you. Can't say I was surprised, although I can't understand it. But it was worth a try. And it was worth seeing your face when you walked in."

El laughed bitterly. "Mike would never sleep with you, you crazy bitch. And you're out of your mind if you think you'll ever have a love like ours - "

El was interrupted by Jaclyn slapping her across the face so hard, a high-pitched ringing sound resonated in her ears.

"Hey, now," she warned. "I'm keeping you alive and healthy, but that doesn't mean I can't fuck up your pretty face if you don't play nice. Are you going to play nice?"

El gave her a slight nod, turning her head to spit out the blood that was beginning to fill her mouth.

"I have to go make an appearance somewhere," said Jaclyn, rising from her seat. "Can't tell you where. Sorry. But nice chat, El."

El heard the clicking of her heels get fainter as Jaclyn walked away.

"I'll be back soon," she said. "Don't try anything stupid."

When she heard the door close, El screamed as loud as she could. Then she cried herself to sleep.

11. Chapter 11

Mike got to Jaclyn's apartment a lot faster than he'd anticipated, seeing as her place was almost all the way across town. He had to drive like a maniac to make good time, cutting people off left and right, and almost got clipped by a bus taking the exit off the freeway. He buzzed at every apartment until someone let him in.

He made his way down the hall to apartment 16, and tried to open the door. It was locked, of course. He kicked it. Once, twice. Then he took a deep breath and body checked it as hard as he could. It gave way. Thankfully, the adrenaline coursing through his veins was giving him a boost of physical strength he needed right now.

"Eleven!" he shouted. "El!"

He checked every room in the apartment. She was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Jaclyn. He went to her room, and began to check her drawers and nightstand, searching for anything that could give him a lead on where she was keeping El. Nothing. He moved to her closet. Clothes, more clothes. He spotted a small chest in the far right corner, and dragged it out of the closet.

Whatever he was expecting to find, this wasn't it.

Inside the chest was a scrapbook that contained pictures of bald children, all different ages, dressed in what appeared to be hospital gowns. Their mugshot-like pose was the only thing they had in common; all of them were looking straight at the camera with miserable facial expressions that seemed to be accentuated by the harsh neon lighting.

"What the fuck," muttered Mike, leaning against Jackie's bed as he studied the pages. Beside every child was a short description: name, age, subject number and abilities.

These had to be from the Lab.

Mike flipped the pages until he reached subject number 11, and as expected, El's picture stared back at him. Mike brushed his fingers

across it. She looked so young - aged six or seven at most. Her small, delicate features were twisted into a scowl. He saw no sign of fear or helplessness in her face, unlike some of the other kids. Only sorrow and anger.

His head spun. What did this mean? Was Jaclyn working for the lab? Was this a sick attempt to steal their baby so they could use it as just another one of their guinea pigs?

Mike checked his watch. He had to get out of Jaclyn's apartment, and call Hopper.

Five hours later, Joyce and Hopper arrived at Oakland International Airport. Mike was waiting for them at the arrivals section. Although he'd promised himself he wouldn't cry, he burst into tears the moment he spotted Joyce's tear-streaked face in the crowd, her arms outstretched to him. Hopper's face was red and puffy, too, but he looked more like he was about to murder someone, which gave Mike the strength to pick himself up. He had to stay calm and focus. Channel his anger into fuel, and find El. This was not the time to break down.

Mike had explained to them very briefly what had happened over the phone - except for the pregnancy, which he was keeping for later. He went over every detail of the day's events with Hopper on the car ride over to his apartment - Jaclyn's attempt to seduce him, El running off. How Jaclyn shot him with a tranquilizer, and how he'd broken into her apartment.

"Mike, you can't break into someone's apartment. You need a warrant for that," said Hopper.

"Seriously, Jim - you think she'll call the cops on me? Breaking and entering when she freaking *kidnapped* El?" asked Mike, turning his head to glance at Hopper in the passenger seat.

"We don't know what she's capable of, Mike. Or where she's keeping El. What if you piss her off and she takes it out on her?"

Mike kept his eyes on the road as he considered this, pressing his lips

together. Shit, he was right. Again.

"I know you wanted to find her," conceded Hopper. "I get that. But you have to play by the rules, Mike. There could be serious consequences to your actions - "

"Okay. Got it," snapped Mike, cutting him off. He sighed, frustrated at himself for lashing out at him. "I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just a little on edge."

"It's okay, kid. But no more breaking and entering, okay?"

Mike nodded. "There's something else. Joyce, would you hand him the book next to you?"

Joyce obliged. It was Jackie's scrapbook.

"The hell is this," mumbled Hopper, flipping through the pages.

"I stole it from her closet," admitted Mike. Hopper gave him a look like he was about to say something, but kept his mouth shut.

"She's from the lab?" asked Hopper.

"I don't know. That's what I'm trying to figure out. She's too young to have worked there, though. And her picture's not in the book, so I don't think she was a part of MKUltra." Mike shook his head in annoyance. He'd been trying to figure out Jaclyn's connection to the lab for hours. Nothing made sense.

"Let me see it, Jim," asked Joyce from the backseat.

When they arrived at the apartment, he showed them to the guest bedroom so they could drop off their bags.

"Let's something else, guys," said Mike, his heart racing inside his chest. Hopper and Joyce looked up at him.

"I found this in El's purse today." He held them the pregnancy test.

Hopper snatched it from his hand and Joyce appeared at his side as they looked down at it.

"I don't know how it happened. El's been taking the pill every day, same hour for years," explained Mike. It was the first time he'd thought about it. How had this pregnancy happened? El was so diligent with her birth control.

"Oh my God," whispered Joyce, her eyes instantly welling up with tears. She looked at Mike, overjoyed. It was the happiest he'd ever seen her. Except for maybe the day they'd brought Will back safe and sound from the Upside Down.

Hopper's face went white, and he unsteadily lowered himself onto the bed. "I need to sit down." Joyce sat next to him as they continued to stare at the pink positive sign. After a few seconds, Hopper's face began to regain some color.

"I'm going to be a grandad," he whispered, his eyes shining with tears as he turned to look at Joyce. Joyce started crying and wrapped her arms around Hopper.

"Oh, Michael," said Joyce as she rose from her seat to give him a hug. "I'm so happy. Congratulations."

Mike felt fat tears roll down his cheeks. "She wants our baby, Joyce. That's what she's after."

"She's after the baby?" repeated Hopper.

"Yeah," said Mike, wiping the tears from his face with the palm of his hands. "It's why she showed up here in the first place. A last ditch attempt to try and make a sibling for it. She's batshit crazy."

Hopper shot up from his seat. "Mike. Think about it. If Jaclyn wants the baby, she has to keep El safe and healthy, so long as she's pregnant."

Mike looked back at Hopper. He was right, obviously. How had he not come to this conclusion by himself before? For the first time in the last eight hours, Mike felt himself breathe a little easier. Eleven and the baby were alive! He closed his eyes and let the wave of relief wash over him. Eleven and the baby. *Their baby*. Now, he had one extra person to love more than life itself. His heart swelled as he

pictured himself holding a mini El, with light brown locks and hazel eyes.

Hopper placed a hand on Mike's shoulder, jerking him from his thoughts.

"We're going to find her, Mike," he said, looking him in the eye. "We're going to find her."

Mike nodded. He had to believe it.

El came to after her nap, once again in complete darkness because of the blindfold. How long had she slept? 20 minutes? Half a day? She had no idea.

"Jaclyn!" she yelled. "Jaclyn, if you're there, I need to talk to you."

A door creaked open. El tried to gauge the distance. Was it 12, 15 feet away? Her sense of hearing was getting better due to sight deprivation. She noted that her olfactory sense was also getting to be more refined. El wondered if this was due to her pregnancy. She was convinced she could make out the smell of concrete and asphalt, and the air was heavy with the stench of mold.

In any case, it was making her want to throw up.

The clicking of Jaclyn's heels drew closer. "What can I do for you, Eleven?"

Untie me, you crazy bitch. "Can I get some water?"

Jaclyn poured her a glass and put it to her lips. El downed the entire thing in one huge swig. "Can I get some food, too? I'm starving."

"You're right on time, I was in the middle of preparing something for you when you called. Chicken liver and offals. It's filled with iron and all the B vitamins, which is exactly what the baby needs right now. I also got you some prenatal vitamins. Open your mouth," she instructed. El obeyed, and Jackie placed two tablets on her tongue, then proceeded to give her some more water to wash them down with.

El had no idea what offals were, but just the thought of chicken liver was making her want to gag.

"Listen, Jac," she said. "Do you think maybe you could remove the blindfold? I promise I won't try anything. I promise."

There was a moment of silence. El prayed that Jackie would concede.

"Okay. But one wrong move El, and the blindfold's going back on. For the rest of your pregnancy. Got it?"

El swallowed hard. "Got it."

"Good." Jackie walked behind her and undid the blindfold.

El shut her eyes, wincing as the light blinded her. The one hanging lamp was positioned directly above her. The rest of the room - which was larger than she'd expected, and made entirely of concrete, as she'd predicted - was completely dark and windowless, of course.

"There you go, all better," said Jackie, pushing El's matted hair away from her face.

"I'm gonna throw up," she declared. Jackie reached beside El and produced a small trash can, and placed it under her chin just in time before she blew chunks.

"Thanks for the heads up, this time," said Jackie, wiping El's mouth with a napkin. "I want to get a small mattress in here for you. My only problem is I'd have to tranq you again once I bring it in, and the drugs aren't good for the baby."

El shook her head. "Please don't drug me, Jackie. I promise I won't try to run away. I'll be good."

"I'll think about it. Hold on, let me get your food." She disappeared and returned moments later with a plate filled with what appeared to be an animal's internal organs. "Aww, don't make that face. I promise it tastes a lot better than it looks. I cooked it up with sweet butter. It's the best way to have it. Trust me, the baby will thank you for this."

Just the smell was enough to make her want to vomit again. But she

figured she had no choice. She had to eat something, and so did the baby.

"You know, El, I feel terrible about all this. Seriously," said Jackie, as she began to fork-feed cut up pieces to her.

Bullshit, thought El as she chewed, holding her breath. Even the texture was horrible.

"You have no idea what it means to me. Having a child with supernatural abilities. It's a dream come true. All thanks to my uncle. I wonder if the baby will have your powers, or different powers completely. In any case, it'll be powerful, for sure," mused Jaclyn as she cut up more meat. "Anyway. Just know that it'll be in very capable hands. Me and the others will train it to its full potential, just like my uncle was doing with you."

El swallowed her bite and looked at Jackie. "The others?"

"Well, my team, of course," said Jackie. "After he passed, I got my hands on the protocols for the equipment my uncle used at the lab for the MKUltra project. We're planning to recreate the whole thing. The project, the lab, everything. Right here in Berkeley. In a perfect world, you and the baby would've been the first subjects for it, but I'm afraid it won't be ready for many years. Takes a lot of time, you know. Everything has to be perfect."

El took in this new piece of information, horrified. She pictured mini Mike again, this time aged six or seven, locked up in a cell with tubes attached to his head. A radioactive microchip in his brain, put in by some sham surgeon.

Something strange thing was happening inside her. She no longer felt fear for herself - she was afraid for her baby. And that same fear was rapidly shifting into anger.

No one was going to hurt her child.

"You're crazy," whispered El.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said you're *crazy*," shouted El. "You're crazy to think you're ever going to lay hands on my baby, Jaclyn. You'll never have him. Never. Mike and my dad are going to find me, and your ass is gonna fry."

Jackie smirked at her. "Keep dreaming, hun. The stress isn't good for the baby." She rose from her seat, taking the leftovers of her disgusting meal with her as she disappeared from the room.

El wished desperately that she could touch her stomach. So much, in fact, that it made her cry. She shook her head, trying to gain control of her emotions. This pregnancy was like a roller-coaster ride for her hormones.

"I'm sorry," she weeped. "I know I have to stay strong for us. I promise she'll never touch you. You're safe, baby. I've got you. I've got you."

She sobbed thinking about the fact that not even 12 hours ago, she was almost certain she wanted to have an abortion. Now, she couldn't fathom how the thought had even crossed her mind. How could she consider killing her and Mike's baby? What was wrong with her?

She let the guilt consume her as drifted off to sleep once again.

This time, she dreamt that she was holding her baby.

12. Chapter 12

El woke from her nap with a terrible cramp in her neck. She was so sick of being tied to this chair. All her limbs were going numb, and her butt hurt like crazy.

"Jaclyn!" El called her name once, twice. Three times. But she wasn't showing.

She's out, thought El. *Or sleeping*. The notion of time had completely escaped her. With no sunlight, it was difficult to tell what time it was, or how long she'd been locked up.

El had an idea. It was a long-shot, but it was her only option.

She would try to reach the Upside Down, without any white noise or blindfold. She'd never done it before, nor had she ever had a reason to try. But it had to be done. It was the only way she could reach Mike.

She would have to focus. It would be hard, especially since she was starving, and her gurgling stomach was impossible to ignore.

El took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Mike tossed and turned in his bed. He glanced at the alarm clock - it was 2:30 am, and he wasn't even close to falling asleep.

Earlier in the evening, Mike had the brilliant idea to contact Kali - thankfully, she was listed in El's contacts at the back page of her school agenda. After Mike told her what had happened, Kali immediately agreed to come help, and told him she would pack her bags to take the first flight out to Oakland from Chicago in the morning.

Then the feds had come by the apartment per Hopper's request. Apparently, the 48 hour wait to file a missing persons claim didn't apply to persons suspected to be a victim of foul play, which El was. Hopper explained to them everything that had happened over the

years with Hawkins Lab, and informed them of Jaclyn's mysterious connection to it. They seemed skeptical about the story from beginning to end, but Hopper told them that every detail he'd provided had been made public after their lawsuit, and to check public records if they didn't believe him. That shut them up. They took Mike's deposition and said they would have someone to monitor Jackie's apartment 24/7, promising to contact them if anything came up.

Mike had been trying to calm his nerves ever since they'd left, repeating to himself over and over again that El and the baby were safe for now. Jaclyn was keeping them alive and healthy. Kali was on her way to help. Plus, he needed to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be another day of searching for clues to find El, and he needed the energy.

After another sleepless half hour, Mike yanked the covers off him, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. It was no use. He figured he'd go watch some T.V., and eventually, sleep would claim him in the wee hours in the morning. He went into the kitchen, and put some water on the stove to boil while he searched the cabinets for El's stash of chamomile tea.

He waited around in the kitchen for the water to boil. A thousand questions clouded his head, and he didn't have the answers to any of them. It was frustrating. How had Jaclyn known about El's pregnancy? Had El told her, and not told him? Why had she felt like she couldn't tell him? Did she think he'd push her to have an abortion? The water came to a boil, and Mike poured it over the teabag.

Suddenly, the light in the kitchen began to flicker in an all-too-familiar manner. Mike looked up at it, hopeful. Could it be...? It continued to flicker for a few more seconds. Then, the lamp in the living area. Mike ran over to it. It switched on.

The pen that was sitting on the coffee table next to their couch began to move, making him jump. His heart raced as he ran to his room to retrieve a notepad from his pile of school books, and ran back to the living room, placing it under the pen. The pen began to write something on the paper. El was trying to tell him something! He sat

down on the couch, eager to read.

I love you, she wrote.

Mike laughed, flooded with relief. She really was here! They had never made inter-dimensional contact like this through the Upside Down. He picked up the pen and wrote:

I love you, El. Both of you. So much.

Mike closed his eyes. He could feel her presence, as if she were sitting right next to him, just like when they were kids. He knew she was there - he just couldn't see her.

Suddenly, he felt droplets of water fall on his bare shoulder. He watched in fascination as the drops trickled down to his chest. His heart seized in his chest when he realized they were El's tears. He wanted so desperately to be able to hold and comfort her.

"El, please don't cry," he whispered. "We're going to find you. Everything's going to be okay. I promise."

Do you have any idea where she's keeping you? He asked her, placing the pen down as he waited for her answer.

No, she wrote back.

Mike stared at the paper. He had never felt so hopeless in his entire life. He felt her wrap her arms around him and placed a hand over her ghost arm, leaning his head against hers. She was right there.

And then she wasn't. Just like that, he felt her presence evaporate.

"Damn it!" he shouted, kicking the coffee table in frustration. He winced at the noise it made, remembering that his in-laws were asleep in the guest bedroom. A groggy, half-naked Hopper appeared in the living moments later.

"What happened? What is it?" he asked, squinting in the light.

"She came to see me," said Mike, lifting up the notepad. Hopper walked over and took it from him.

"She can do that?" he asked.

"Apparently," replied Mike, equally baffled. "I felt her tears, too. They fell on my shoulder. Literally. She was right here just a minute ago. But she's gone now."

Hopper stared back at him.

"Go back to sleep, Jim. I'll stay up tonight and let you know if she comes back in the morning."

"Kid, you should some rest -"

"Jim," interrupted Mike. "I'm staying up." He stared him down to let him know his decision was final, and there was nothing Hopper could do about it.

Hopper smiled. "Okay. Night, kid."

Mike shut the lamp, and curled up on the couch with a blanket.

He fell asleep at the break of dawn.

El came to on her chair.

It had worked! She'd made contact with Mike! And in ways she'd never been able to before. Were her powers growing because of the baby? And why had she come back so fast? She'd meant to stay with Mike a little while longer.

Her stomach growled. It was her hunger that had made her lose focus, no doubt. She felt terribly weak and nauseous.

El laughed, overjoyed with her breakthrough. She had done it! The next step was to go back to the Upside Down to somehow figure out where she was being kept. But it would take a lot of energy. She'd have to wait for Jaclyn to return with breakfast.

And this time, she would finish every single bite, no matter how disgusting it was.

The door creaked open. El blinked. She must have fallen asleep again.

"Morning," chirped Jaclyn. "Ready for breakfast?" She walked over to El, and leaned down to touch her stomach. El had to fight the urge to bite her hand off.

Or send her flying across the room. Whichever.

For breakfast, Jackie had prepared a plate of egg whites and broccoli, with a green smoothie on the side, which was perfect. El happily obliged when Jaclyn fork-fed her bite after bite until there was nothing left, and downed the smoothie in a matter of seconds.

Jaclyn smiled proudly at her. "Listen, I have to go run some errands, but I'll be back for lunch, I promise. Don't want little Martin to go hungry."

Martin?! El ground her teeth together, trying to keep her cool. This was not the time to piss off Jaclyn. All she needed was for her leave so she could get back to the Upside Down and find a way out of here. The best she could do was offer her a tight smile.

Jaclyn beamed at her. "I'm glad you're cooperating, Eleven. It'll make things so much easier. For all three of us."

It was hard for El not to bash her head against the wall as she left the room.

"Okay, come on, come on," El whispered to herself, closing her eyes to focus on reaching the Upside Down before her breakfast came back up.

13. Chapter 13

Mike got woken up by the blinding sunlight coming through the patio door. He groaned, and moved a pillow over his head.

Then he remembered last night's events, and sat up immediately.

"Please be real, please be real," he whispered, reaching for the notepad on the coffee table. He smiled when he saw El's handwriting etched across the page. Her visit last night had given him faith. She was alive. It was only a matter of time before she'd figure out where Jaclyn was keeping her, then relay the information to him. He believed it. And more than anything, he believed in her.

He walked into the kitchen to fix himself a pot of coffee, and noticed that Joyce had left a note for him on the counter.

Michael,

We borrowed your car to pick up Kali at the airport (we'll be careful with it, don't worry!)

Figured we'd let you sleep in a little bit.

Be back soon,

Joyce and Jim xxx

Mike glanced at his watch. It was 9h00, which meant he'd gotten roughly four hours of sleep. He poured himself a cup of much-needed coffee and went back to the living room.

He picked up the phone and dialed home. His mother picked up on the on the ring.

"Michael, sweetheart, I'm so glad you called. How are you holding up? Any developments?" she asked him eagerly.

Mike figured that Joyce had contacted Karen before leaving Hawkins to let her know what had happened. He was hesitant to tell her about El's visit last night, since Karen hadn't fully wrapped her head around

the Upside Down yet - the dynamics of it was still a grey area for her, and Mike didn't have the energy to get into it this early in the morning. So he decided to lie and tell her there was nothing new for now, then asked her to put Nancy on the line.

A few seconds later, she picked up the phone. "Mike?"

"Hey, Nance."

"God, I'm so sorry about Eleven, Mike. I know you'll find her."

Mike was grateful she didn't ask him how he was doing. "Thanks, Nancy."

"You know I'm not just saying that to make you feel better, right? I believe it."

Mike smiled into the phone. "She came to see me last night. I felt her right next to me."

"Wow," whispered Nancy. "I'm not surprised. She'll always find her way back to you."

"There's something else," he said. "I want to tell you, but you can't tell Mom. Or Holly. Not yet."

"Okay... go on..."

Mike took a deep breath. "El's pregnant, Nancy. I don't know how it happened. She's been taking her birth control, same time, every day, for years. But she must have skipped one by accident or something."

"SHUT UP!" yelled Nancy. "SHUT UP! Oh my God, Mike! I'm so happy for you! Congratulations! I'm going to be an aunt! I can't believe it. I think I'm gonna cry."

"Nance -"

"Am I going to be Godmother? I know we've had our differences in the past, but Mike, I promise that I will be there for your child, always. I'm going to spoil it, and love it and -"

Mike cut her off. "Okay, slow down! Whatever happened to my pragmatic sister? I thought you were going to tell me we were too young to have a baby."

"Well, I mean... sure, it's not ideal that you still have two years left at Berkeley. But at least El finishes her program in the spring, and then she'll be able to take some time off. Plus, it's not like you can't afford it," said Nancy. "And Mom and I will be more than happy to help you and El with the baby when you come back home in the summer."

"So you don't think it's a bad idea?"

"Of course not," replied Nancy. "The timing may be a little off, but you can handle it. I'm sure of it. You guys are unstoppable."

Mike smiled, relieved at his sister's positive response to the big news. "Thanks, Nance."

He heard the front door open. Joyce and Hopper had returned with Kali.

"I have to go," he told her. "I'll let you know what's happening."

"Okay," said Nancy. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Everything's going to be okay."

El opened her eyes, and found herself once again standing in the middle of the familiar abyss that was the Upside Down, the shallow water on the ground reflecting in the darkness.

A familiar-looking boy, aged about four or five, was waving at her in the distance. She took a few steps towards him, and quickly realized that he looked exactly like the mini Mike she'd been picturing in her head. No, it was him. She ran faster and faster until she'd finally reached him.

The boy looked *exactly* like Mike: black wavy hair, chestnut eyes. He even had his square jawline and perfect lips.

No doubt, she was looking at her future child.

"Hi," he said to her simply, his small voice echoing everywhere around her in the Upside Down. El had never heard anything so adorable.

"Hi," she laughed, kneeling down to get a better look at him. She pushed his black curls away from his beautiful face, stroking his soft cheek in the process.

He placed his tiny hands on both sides of her face and began to study it carefully, running them gently across her forehead, eyebrows, nose and lips, as if he were trying to memorize her features. The sweet gesture brought tears to her eyes immediately, and a warm, fuzzy feeling washed over her, flooding her entire body with love and happiness. She laughed, his light touch tickling her skin as he explored her face.

"Come here," she said, stretching her arms out to him. He wrapped his arms around her neck, squeezing her. El held him as close to her as physically possible, nuzzling her face into his neck. Tears trickled down her cheeks and onto his skin. He smelled like home.

He broke the hug, and looked at her with a serious expression on his face. "I'm here to help you, Mommy."

El frowned. "What do you mean, baby?"

"You have to take my hand," he instructed, holding it out to her. She took it immediately, and his small fingers curled around her hand.

Suddenly, a movie-like image reel began to unfold inside her head. She was seeing everything that had happened in the last two days, but from an outsider's point of view. She saw Jaclyn tranquilize her and Mike. She saw Jaclyn drag her unconscious body inside a minivan, and saw her what exit she took on the highway towards Lafayette. And she saw the beat-up neon sign of the abandoned building where Jaclyn pulled up.

The Clandestine - 5150 Ridge Road

The vision ended abruptly, and mini Mike was gone. She blinked,

stunned after her out of body experience, and absent-mindedly moved her hand to her stomach. Her unborn son had just saved her life. He'd just shown her all that from the womb. El could only wonder just how powerful he'd be in the future.

A deep sadness came over her. She hadn't even had the chance to say goodbye, or even thank you. More tears doubled over and fell down her cheeks as she stroked her belly affectionately. "Thank you, baby," she whispered.

"Jane!" A familiar voice resonated in the darkness. "Jane!"

"Kali!" El shouted, looking in every direction to see where she was coming from. She spotted a figure in the distance and sprinted towards it. "Kali!"

"Jane!"

They embraced each other tightly. "Oh my God, Kali. You're here," weeped El.

"I got you, Jane, I got you."

El pulled away, holding her at arms length. "5150 Ridge Road, in Lafayette. Inside an abandoned building called The Clandestine," she informed her. "Go back and tell Mike. Now."

"5150 Ridge Road, Lafayette. The Clandestine. Got It," Kali repeated, imprinting the information inside her brain. Then she closed her eyes, and disappeared.

Kali gasped as she returned from the Upside Down. Mike, Hopper, and Joyce were all staring down at her expectantly.

"So?" asked Mike immediately.

"5150 Ridge Road in Lafayette. A building called The Clandestine."

They were on the move immediately. Mike grabbed his keys while Hopper made a quick phone call to 911.

It was time to rescue El.

El was again jolted from the Upside Down prematurely. She opened her eyes, and realized that she was dripping head to toe in freezing cold water. A very panicked-looking Jaclyn was standing before her.

"What have you done?" she yelled, pacing nervously.

"What are you talking about?" asked El innocently. "I was sleeping."

Jaclyn leaned down and grabbed her by the chin. "Stop lying to me! What did you do?" She wiped El's nose with a napkin. It was drenched in blood.

El looked down at it, unbothered. "I didn't do anything, I swear."

Jaclyn slapped her across the face. "STOP LYING!" she shouted. "You used your powers! You did something!"

El shrugged. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Jaclyn."

"I heard you say it! 5150 Ridge Road! How did you know?"

El shrugged again. "A little birdie told me." Another slap.

Jaclyn was so positively fuming, El could almost see the steam coming out of her ears.

"Fuck!" she shouted. "I have to get you out of here. We're moving. Now."

The feds and paramedics were one step ahead of Mike, Hopper, Joyce and Kali. They'd already set up the safety perimeter, and the S.W.A.T. team was lined up behind their van, receiving instructions from their team leader.

Mike's heart was beating out of his chest as he ran towards the building. A cop approached him.

"Sir, the area's off limits," he said, holding his hand up at him.

"My pregnant girlfriend is inside!" yelled Mike, frantically trying to move past him. The cop moved firmly in front of him.

"Sir, I can't let you pass -"

Mike was about to chew his goddamn head off when he felt Hopper's hand slam down on his shoulder, holding him back.

"You have to let them do their job, kid," he said.

"THEN WHY ARE THEY JUST STANDING THERE!" he yelled in the direction of the S.W.A.T. team.

"Sir, our team is just about to enter the premises," the cop said. "You have to stand back."

Jaclyn returned moments later with a tranq gun in her hands.

"Remember, this is all your fault," she said, raising the gun at El.

Now was her time.

El sent Jaclyn flying across the room, holding her up against the wall. Jaclyn dropped the tranq gun as El tightened her telekinetic force around her neck, choking her.

"YOU CRAZY BITCH!" she yelled, tightening her hold around her throat, drunk with rage. It was taking every ounce of self-control not to snap her neck. Suddenly, four cops came barging through the door.

"What the fuck," mumbled one of them as they all gazed up at Jaclyn's elevated body pressed against the wall. El ceased her hold on her, causing her to fall to the ground in a fit of coughs. The four cops just stood there glancing at each other for a few seconds, stunned at what they had witnessed.

"Untie me!" yelled El, jolting them from their momentary daze. A cop immediately ran over to her and began cutting the binding around her hands and ankles, while the three other ones cuffed and detained Jaclyn. The cop helped her off the chair, and El wobbled unsteadily to her feet. The lower part of her body was completely numb.

"Miss, are you okay?" he asked her. It was the stupidest question she'd ever heard. El ignored him and walked over to Jaclyn. She grabbed her roughly by the chin, and looked her dead in the eye.

"I told you they'd find me," she told her. "And your psycho ass is going to rot in jail." Then she ambled out of the room, walking as fast as her wobbly legs would allow her.

"Miss, hold on!" said the cop, running after her. El ignored him again, jogging up the stairs that would lead her to the back exit of the building. She pushed through the door. Fresh air filled her lungs, invigorating her.

"Mike!" she yelled, jogging to the front of the building, willing her legs to go faster. The first thing she noticed were the multiple cop cars, S.W.A.T. team van and paramedics parked out in front.

"Hold your fire!" shouted the S.W.A.T. leader.

Then she saw him.

"MIKE!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, full-on running towards him now.

Mike jumped over the safety perimeter and sprinted towards her. "ELEVEN!"

El jumped into his arms, wrapping her limbs around his body in one swift movement. He spun her around and held her tighter than he ever had before. They stayed like that for a long time, crying into each other's arms.

He put her down gently, placing his hands on both sides of her face. "Hi," he laughed, his tear streaked face smiling down at her.

"Hi," she replied, wiping his tears. He leaned down to kiss her. She took his face in her hands and deepened the kiss, then threw her arms around him again. "I was so scared, Mike."

He tightened his hold around her back, and nuzzled his face into her neck. "I know, El. It's over. It's over."

She rested her head on his chest and let the relief wash over her in the comfort of his arms.

She was home.

14. Chapter 14

Moments after El was rescued, the paramedics insisted on taking her to the hospital to make sure she and the baby were fine. The doctor confirmed her pregnancy, even though there was no longer any doubt in her mind that she was, in fact, pregnant, after her experience with her future son in the Upside Down. He informed her that she was four weeks into her pregnancy, and that the embryo was approximately the size of a poppy seed. *A very powerful poppy seed*, thought El, thinking back to her encounter with him in the Upside Down. She couldn't wait to tell Mike all about it later.

The doctor recommended that she also see a psychologist to help her deal with the trauma of what had happened to her. At first El told him she felt fine, and that she was just happy to be home safe so she could focus on putting the whole thing behind her, but reconsidered when the doctor explained to her that she wasn't feeling any of the PTSD symptoms yet because she was probably still in shock. He pressed that the forthcoming stress and anxiety would be detrimental to the baby.

"You should do it," agreed Mike, taking her hand. "I'll even come with you if you want. Do it for the baby."

El's heart swelled. His response to her pregnancy had been even better than she'd anticipated. She knew he'd be supportive, but she never expected him to be so excited about it. His joy over becoming a father made her love him even more, if such a thing was even possible.

"Okay," she said. "I'll do it."

Afterwards, Mike drove her to the police station so she could give her full deposition while the events were still fresh in her head. El provided them with every single detail about her relationship with Jaclyn. The police confirmed that her real name was actually Jaclyn Brenner, daughter of Marshall and Lisa Brenner. Just hearing the name again made her want to vomit. All she wanted for Christmas this year was to never hear the name Brenner again.

They returned home to find that Joyce and Kali had decorated the entire apartment with pink and blue balloons, and had prepared a nice celebration dinner for her. Mike was in on the whole thing, of course. He'd gotten her a bottle of the finest alcohol-free champagne to celebrate. El decided not to tell her parents and Kali about the son she'd foreseen in the Upside Down. She didn't want them diminishing her experience in any way by telling her she'd imagined the whole thing. She could already hear her father's voice in her head telling her it was only normal to start seeing things after what she'd been through. No, she would tell Mike when they'd be just the two of them, and have some fun letting the rest of her friends and family speculate on the sex of the baby.

The following day, she and Mike drove her parents to the airport in the morning, then Kali later in the afternoon. Mike handed Kali a cheque for 1,000\$ to cover the expenses of her flight.

Kali shook her head, pushing the cheque away. "I can't accept it, Mike. It's too much."

"It's not enough for what you've done for us," he insisted, handing it back to her. "Please."

Kali gave him a hug and thanked him profusely, and told him she'd pay them back once she'd come close to finish paying off her college tuition. Mike told her not to worry about it. Then she embraced El.

"Thank you so much, Kali," whispered El. "I don't know what I'd do without you in my life."

Kali's eyes were gleaming with tears when she pulled away. "That's what sisters are for, Jane." Then she was gone.

Karen called later in the evening and told them to turn on the T.V. asap - El's story had made the national news. The reporter talked about Hawkins Lab, Jaclyn Brenner and her group of fanatics that were planning to recreate the controversial MKUltra project, and even showed images from the hidden laboratory the police had begun to dismantle in Elmwood, confirming everything that Jaclyn had said. They also revealed that they had found a list in one of Jaclyn's associates belongings that contained the names of a few other

potential victims. They encouraged anyone who could have any further information on the suspects to come forward. When the segment had finished, Mike disappeared from the room and returned moments later with Jackie's scrapbook in hand.

"What is it?" asked El, taking it from him.

"I found it in Jaclyn's closet when I broke into her apartment," he replied casually.

El's eyebrows shot up. "You broke into her apartment?"

Mike nodded proudly. "Busted down the door, and everything."

"My hero," she laughed, kissing him on the cheek. She flipped the book open, and gasped when she saw the photos of the children inside, immediately realizing who they were. The other victims of the MKUltra project. She brushed her hand along the photographs that were familiar to her.

"Bianca Whitfield, number 2," she whispered, studying the picture of a blonde girl. "I remember hearing her last name blaring over the megaphone, all the time. She tried to run away every week. I think they ended up killing her."

She flipped the page, and pointed to an African-American boy with piercing, white blue eyes. "Christopher Mink, number 6. He could read minds. He was the first one to run away, even before Kali."

She flipped the pages until she landed upon the picture of herself. Tears welled up in her eyes instantly, and she began to sniffle. Damn pregnancy hormones acting up again.

Mike frowned. "El, what's wrong," he asked, concerned.

"I'm sorry," she wept. "It's the whole pregnancy thing. I can't stop crying."

Mike laughed as he wrapped his arms around her. "El, you've got plenty of reasons to cry after everything what happened. It's completely normal that you're emotional." He gently took the book from her hands and set it aside. "We don't have to keep looking at it. I

just thought you should see it."

"I'm just so over it. The project, Hawkins Lab. It has to stop. It has to go away," she cried into his chest. "I want to find the others. As many as I can. And I want us to dismantle the whole operation, shut it down forever. Then we burn the whole thing to the ground."

"Hey, that's a great idea, El," encouraged Mike. "We could look for them. We have their names, city of birth, family background, and everything else we need in here. No more secrets. No more hiding. We shine some light on the whole damn thing from beginning to end. Expose everything they've done, but on a wider scale. Not just in Hawkins."

El's crying came to a halt as she considered this. "Okay, but not yet. I just want to focus on us, the baby, and school for the next few months. Maybe next year."

"I couldn't agree more," he said, holding her tighter in his arms. "No more talk about the Lab. Happy thoughts only."

El immediately thought of the curly-haired mini Mike.

"Mike, before Kali found me in the Upside Down... I saw our future son. He was older, maybe five years old. He looked exactly like you."

Mike's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to tell you in front of my parents and Kali because I didn't want them to tell me I'd imagined it. But he was real, Mike. I touched him. I smelled him. He called me *mommy*." Her voice cracked at the last word, and the memory brought fresh tears to her eyes. "He asked me to hold his hand. And then he showed me everything that happened. It was like a movie, but inside my head. That's how I found out where she was keeping me. He showed me everything I needed to see. Then he was gone."

Mike was staring at her in utter fascination. "You're serious?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

His mind seemed to be racing a million miles an hour as he

considered this. "We're having a boy?" he finally whispered, his entire face lighting up with joy.

"Yeah," she said again, her lips curling up into a huge smile. "We're having a boy."

Mike's eyes welled up with tears. He leaned in to kiss her.

They were going to be a family.

"What do you think about Eric?" asked El, as they waited inside the doctor's office at the clinic. Today was her mid-pregnancy ultrasound. It also happened to be Mike's 21st birthday - March 15th.

Mike grimaced. "No."

"Jeremy?"

"No. Times ten."

El sighed. They agreed on almost everything in life. Unfortunately, baby names was not one of those things.

The door opened, and a man appearing to be in his late twenties entered the room. "Hi, I'm David, your ultrasound technician," he said, flashing a set of perfectly white teeth. "You must be Jane."

El shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, David."

"And you must be the father," he said, extending his hand out to Mike.

Mike's face lit up with pride. "Mike Wheeler, nice to meet you."

"Okay, let's get started. Jane, I'm going to need you to lie down right here," he instructed, motioning to the examination table. El obliged, and David proceeded to cover her rounded stomach with a cold gel that made her grimace.

"I'm sorry, I should have warned you. This thing is really cold," he said, moving the transducer over her stomach. Mike and El both

gasped in awe when the shape of a baby appeared on the screen next to them.

"There's your baby," said the tech, not tearing his eyes off the screen. Mike leaned in closer and took El's hand in his, his entire body flooding with indescribable joy. El glanced up at him, her eyes shining with tears.

"Would you like to know the sex?" he asked, turning his head to look at both of them. Mike and El glanced each other, a secret smile etched upon their lips.

"Yes," they both said at the same time.

"It's a boy," he said. "Congratulations."

The phone was ringing when they stepped foot inside their apartment after the ultrasound.

Mike picked up. "Hello?"

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" shouted Karen, Holly, and Nancy at the same time. "We love you!"

"Love you too," he said. "Hey, we just got back from El's ultrasound. Would you guys like to know the sex of the baby?"

"Oh my God, yes! Okay, hold on... Wait... how do I put him on speakerphone again, Holly?" Holly groaned as she told her mother what button to press.

"Okay, we're listening!" said Karen. "What is it! I'm dying to know!"

"It's a boy," announced El.

All three of them began to scream. Mike winced, and jabbed the *Volume Down* button on the speaker.

"A boy! I knew it!" cried Holly. "You girls both owe me 5\$ dollars, by the way."

15. Chapter 15

Guys this is it! The final chapter! I want to thank everyone once again for your amazing reviews. I love you all, and I really hope you enjoy the epilogue!

If you think I should write another story, please don't hesitate to let me know :) Your support is everything!

Much love,

Gabby xxx

EPILOGUE

July 25th, 1992

"Max, that's way too tight!"

"It needs to hold! Just stay still for a minute!" El grimaced as Max secured the last bobby pin into place. Granted, Max was not the most delicate person in the world, but El's patience and tolerance was wearing especially thin leading into the last month of her pregnancy. She was huge. She could no longer do the simplest things like tying her shoes or getting out of bed in the morning, and it bothered her that she needed Mike's help to do absolutely everything.

Karen, Joyce, and Nancy had convinced her not to postpone the wedding because of her pregnancy by making her believe she'd look radiant and beautiful in her wedding dress with her perfectly round belly. El wished she'd have never listened to them. She didn't feel radiant and beautiful - on the contrary, she felt sweaty and bloated and impatient. Her feet were so swollen, she could barely even fit into her beautiful Louboutins anymore. She wanted to cry. This was her wedding day. She was marrying the love of her life. What was wrong with her?

They'd decided to have the wedding at an intimate lakeside country club, deep into the woods on the outskirts of Hawkins. It was a

beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon, which again would have delighted El, had she not been a walking planet. Turns out summer weather was much less enjoyable when you were heavily pregnant, and summer so far had been excruciatingly hot and humid - even by Indiana standards. For the first time in her life, El couldn't wait for the cooler autumn days to come.

"Max, I need to sit down," she declared.

"Okay," said Max, taking her hand. "1, 2, 3..."

El slowly lowered herself down into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, then laid down onto it.

"El! You're going to mess up your hair again!"

"Ice," said El, ignoring her. "I need ice, Max. Or a glass of ice cold water. I'm dying."

A knock at the door. Joyce and Nancy ushered inside.

"Eleven, sweetheart, are you alright?" asked Joyce, concerned when she noticed El sprawled across the bed with her eyes closed.

"She's dying," declared Max with a hint of sarcasm as she rolled her eyes. "I'll be back with some water."

"Nance, help me." Nancy appeared beside El and grabbed her hands to yank her back into a sitting position. She reached for the tissue box on the nightstand and sat down beside El, jabbing her face with a tissue.

"Hun, your makeup is coming off a little bit."

"I know," replied El in a low growl. "I can't help it."

"Everyone's ready for you, sweetie. The ceremony's about to start," informed Joyce.

"Water first. I'll pass out halfway to the altar if I don't."

Nancy and Joyce exchanged glances. Max returned with two huge

glasses of water with ice. El smiled. Max knew her too well.

"Thanks," said El. She downed both of them within fifteen seconds.

"Ow, brain freeze," she winced, pressing her palm into her forehead.

"Yeah, no kidding," Max replied flatly, taking the two empty glasses from her. She put them down on the nightstand and then stretched out her hands to El.

"Okay, 1,2,3..." Max helped her to her feet in one swift movement. She pouted as Max mercilessly tugged on her dress in an effort to straighten it out. El had barely gained any weight at all, except in her breasts. She couldn't understand why everyone thought that was such an added positive to being pregnant - none of her bras fit her anymore, and it was just another place for her to sweat from. However, she had to admit her cleavage looked great in her strapless, flowy lace dress.

Joyce beamed at her. "Sweetheart, you look so beautiful."

"You look amazing," agreed Nancy. "Come see yourself in the mirror."

"I don't want to," whined El. "Thanks for the encouragement, guys. But I feel terrible."

"Nonsense. Come on," said Nancy, dragging her in front of the mirror.

El had to admit she looked better than she felt. Her shoulder-length brown hair was curled into loose ringlets and pinned to her head in a very classy updo, with her long veil secured at the back of it. It had been a painful process, but it had been worth it. Her makeup was very simple, per El's request, and consisted of a bare minimum of mascara and a hint of highlight and blush, completed with a very light pink lip shade.

Nancy squeezed her shoulders, her eyes glimmering with tears. She dabbed a tissue in the corners of her eyes. "I'm so happy for you both."

"Don't you cry Nancy Wheeler, you're going to make me cry," warned Joyce.

"No one cry, okay?" said El, holding up her hands at them. "You guys how much of a blubbering mess I've become these last few months. If any of you start crying, I'm going to lose it."

"Okay, no crying," lied Joyce. "But we have to get going, sweetie. Just breathe, everything's going to be perfect." They all proceeded to give her a quick hug, wish her good luck, then disappeared.

El took a deep breath, and stroked her belly, which had become her new habit in times of stress. "We got this, Zac. We got this." After struggling for months to find a boy's name they both liked, she and Mike had landed on the name Zachary - Zac for short.

Another knock at the door. This time, it was her dad. His jaw fell to the floor when he saw her, and he immediately teared up at the sight of her in her wedding dress.

"Dad, no! Stop! No crying!" she said. But it was too late. She already felt her own tears begin to form.

"It's your wedding day, baby. Of course your old man's going to shed a few tears. Look at you." He glanced down to her stomach with an amused expression on his face. "You sure you're not going to pop on your way down the aisle?"

El rolled her eyes. "Don't jinx it, please. You know how unlucky I am with that sort of thing."

"Okay, got it," he chuckled, and proudly stuck his arm out to her. "Ready?"

She smiled, and laced her arm through his. "Ready."

The ceremony was to take place outside, on a little island in the middle of the lake. Holly - their flower girl - was to give the signal that El was ready to go. Kali and Max, her bridesmaids, were waiting for her near the double glass doors that looked onto the picturesque backyard.

"Go ahead, Holly," instructed Hopper.

Holly gave him a firm nod, then walked out, assuming her position

with her bouquet of roses in hand. Soon after, Wagner's traditional march started playing, which was Max and Kali's cue to start following after Holly down to the site. They gave her a quick three-way hug before heading out.

"Don't trip on the way down," teased Max, winking at her. El shot her a look.

As soon as Hopper and El stepped outside the main building, a sudden fanfare trilled through the soaring music. *One step at a time*, she told herself as they began to descend to the slow tempo of the march. She didn't lift her eyes until her feet were safely on the flat ground - the hill that led down to the lake was surprisingly steep, and El had to hold on to her father's arm for dear life. Her heart was beating out of her chest.

As she and her dad crossed over the little bridge that led to the island, El was distracted by the profusion of white blossoms that hung in garlands, dripping with long lines of white gossamer ribbons. El tore her eyes from the bowery canopy and searched across the rows of the satin-draped chairs - blushing as she took in the crowd of familiar faces all focused on her as they murmured amongst themselves - until she saw Mike's smiling face at last, standing before an arch overflowing with more flowers, looking more handsome than ever before in a classic black tux. And suddenly, it was only the pressure of Hopper's hand on hers that kept her from sprinting down the aisle.

The march was too slow as El struggled to pace her steps to its rhythm, but thankfully, the aisle was very short, and at last, she was there. Mike held out his hand. Hopper took her hand and, in a symbol as old as the world, placed it in Mike's. And just like that, she was home again.

His eyes gleamed with tears. "Hi," he whispered.

"Hi," she whispered back, taking his other hand in hers. The minister went on with the religious part of the ceremony until it was finally time for their vows.

Mike cleared his throat as he glanced down to his cue card. "Eleven.

My El," he began. "You are the shining light of my life. Not only are you my best friend - you're my soulmate, my partner, my wife, and so much more. Simply put, you're everything to me. Looking at you today, gloriously pregnant with our son, I don't think I've ever seen you look more beautiful. I couldn't be more proud to become your husband, and the father of your child. I couldn't be happier to spend the rest of my life waking up with you by my side. Because I know that whatever happens, we can face it together. I love you, Eleven. My heart has been yours from the moment we met. It's yours - always and forever."

El let the tears fall down her cheeks as she listened to Mike's sweet words. There was no way she'd be able to fight it. Plus, she could hear the girls crying in the front row - Nancy, Karen, Holly and Joyce. Even Max, who never cried, was red-eyed and puffy-faced.

It was her turn to read her vows. Max handed her a small cue card.

"Mike," she began in a shaky voice. "My sweet Mike. My pillar. My rock. I can't even imagine how my life would have turned out had you not saved me in the woods, in what seems like another lifetime ago. I can't imagine it, because I truly believe you and I were fated to meet. We were destined to cross paths, and my life was meant to merge with yours." The crying was getting out of control now, and she had to pause to get a hold on herself. Mike was crying, too, and squeezed her hands in encouragement.

She took a deep breath and continued. "There is no other path for me than the one we're on together. You're the solution to all the bad things that have happened to my life. You're my guardian angel, and nothing ever will, or can, keep us apart. I love you unconditionally. I always have, and I always will. I can't wait to spend every day of the rest of my life with you. And I know you'll be the most amazing father to our son."

All the boys were sniffing now. Dustin and Lucas were dabbing their eyes with their sleeves, while Will was silently weeping behind Mike.

It was time to say the binding words and exchange rings. Will handed Mike El's ring, while Max handed El Mike's ring.

"I do," El managed to choke out in a nearly unintelligible whisper.

When it was Mike's turn to speak, the words rang clear and victorious. "I do."

The minister declared them husband and wife, and then Mike's hands reached up to cradle her face carefully, as if it were as delicate as the white petals swaying above their heads. He bent his head toward El's, and she stretched up on the tips of her toes, throwing her arms - protruding belly and all - around his neck. Mike kissed her tenderly, adoringly, and El forgot the cheering crowd, the place, and time, only remembering that she was his, and he was hers, for the rest of their lives.